Part 5: The Desire to Return to the Land of Jerusalem

Randall P. Spackman

Nephi recorded five instances when his relatives complained about their hardships and also expressed dissatisfaction about leaving the land or city of Jerusalem or a desire to return. The first three of these instances occurred before the group left their base camp by the Red Sea. At that camp, if not before, Laman and Lemuel complained about leaving Judah because they did not believe Jerusalem could be destroyed (1 Nephi 2:6-3:6). Next, when Lehi's sons returned for the brass plates, Laman was unsuccessful in his attempt to get the plates and the older brothers immediately wanted "to return unto [their] father" (1 Nephi 3:14), but not to stay at the base camp. Nephi's response indicates that his brothers wanted to bring their parents back to the land. He argued that if their father were to return after being ordered by the Lord to leave, Lehi would perish (1 Nephi 3:18). The third instance of murmuring occurred when Lehi's sons were with the family of Ishmael traveling toward the Red Sea. The older siblings in both families decided they wanted to go back to the land (1 Nephi 7:5-7). Nephi prophesied their deaths if they returned. Laman and Lemuel erupted in fury, bound him with cords and attempted to leave him in the desert to die (1 Nephi 7:8-16). Other family members intervened and the entire group continued the journey to the base camp by the Red Sea (1 Nephi 7:17-22).

The fourth instance occurred several months later, when "Ishmael died, and was buried" and his daughters "did mourn exceedingly, because of the loss of their father, and because of their afflictions in the wilderness." In their distress, "they did murmur against [Lehi] because he had brought them out of the land of Jerusalem ... and they were desirous to return again to Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 16:34-36). Laman attempted to convince some of the others to kill Lehi and Nephi, a plot that would have destroyed the family leaders who were intent on seeking the promised land. The Lord intervened somehow and the plot failed (1 Nephi 16:37-39).

After eight years of travail in the wilderness, Lehi's group reached a land by the seashore with "much fruit and also wild honey," which they called "Bountiful," where they were able to obtain "timbers" (1 Nephi 17:4-6; 18:1-2). There, the Lord ordered Nephi to build the ship that would take them to the promised land (1 Nephi 17:7-16). Laman and Lemuel mocked the idea. To their thinking, Nephi's imaginations were as foolish as Lehi's. If their wives had died before leaving Jerusalem, it would have been better than what they had suffered in the wilderness. The brothers believed the people in the land of Jerusalem were righteous. If the brothers had not followed Lehi, they could have enjoyed their land and possessions and they "might have been happy" (1 Nephi 17:17-22). On this fifth occasion of murmuring, returning to the land of Jerusalem is not mentioned. Probably no one wanted to repeat the awful journey. Each of these five instances of murmuring is consistent with Lehi leaving the city early or late in Zedekiah's reign, except for the mention of Jeremiah's imprisonment during the third instance (1 Nephi 7:14). No assumptions are required to understand their longing for home, coupled with discontent with their hardships, whether early or late in the reign of Zedekiah.

If they had returned, what would Lehi's group have found in the land of their inheritance? In 609 B.C., pharaoh Necho II killed Judah's king Josiah in a battle at Megiddo, north of Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chronicles 35:20-24). Necho's army continued east to Carchemish on the Euphrates River, where Egypt sought to maintain the eastern boundary of its dominion. Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, was installed as king of Judah. However, when Necho returned, he forced Jehoahaz into captivity in Egypt and placed his brother, Eliakim, on the throne as an Egyptian vassal with an obligation to pay heavy tribute to Egypt. Eliakim was renamed Jehoiakim. Then, in 605 B.C., the Babylonian army destroyed the Egyptian garrison at Carchemish and defeated the

Egyptians again at Hamath. Shortly after that Babylonian victory, Nebuchadrezzar learned of his father's death and returned to Babylon to take the throne and consolidate his power there. In 604, the Babylonians swept into Syria again, made vassals of the kings who would surrender (perhaps including Jehoiakim in Judah) and destroyed the city of Ashkelon on the Mediterranean coast. The Babylonian army returned in the following years to enforce the payment of tribute and in late 601, Nebuchadrezzar attempted to invade Egypt itself. The Egyptian army drove the Babylonians back, inflicting such heavy losses that the Babylonians did not return to enforce the tribute payments in the following year. About that time, Jehoiakim realigned his kingdom with Egypt. Nebuchadrezzar responded to that rebellion by sending some of his own troops and guerilla bands to harass the people of Judah, but Jehoiakim kept his allegiance to Egypt. Thus, in December 598 B.C., the Babylonian army again set out for Jerusalem and that same month (or a few days before), Jehoiakim died under uncertain circumstances. His eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin, received the throne of Judah, only to relinquish it three months and ten days later when the Babylonian army stood at the gates of Jerusalem. Jehoiachin's twenty-one year old uncle, Mattaniah (renamed Zedekiah) was then enthroned by Nebuchadrezzar.[1]

Lehi's and Ishmael's families survived these events (including the great exile when Zedekiah was enthroned) and they seem to have prospered under both Egyptian and Babylonian rule. When Lehi escaped from Jerusalem, he owned a house in the city, land outside the city and his treasure (1 Nephi 1:7; 2:4). Hence, if Lehi's group escaped from Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah, the desire of some in the group to return to the land of Jerusalem certainly is understandable. The murmuring ones seem to have believed that they would continue to prosper in the land, despite any wrongdoings by the ruling elite at Jerusalem.

However, when the Babylonians invaded Judah in the ninth year of Zedekiah, the blockade of the rebellious cities was tightened and the Babylonians destroyed them one by one (Jeremiah 34:6-7). By the middle of Zedekiah's eleventh year (Jeremiah 39:2; 52:5-7), these cities were in ruins, many of their citizens had been killed and some survivors had been deported to Babylonia (2 Kings 25:11; Jeremiah 39:9).

If Lehi left Jerusalem late in Zedekiah's reign, why would the murmuring ones have wanted to return to a devastated land and ruined cities? This question might be misleading because of the assumptions on which it is based. Was the land devastated? Were all of the cities in ruin? One might speculate that if the siege of Jerusalem had been imposed near the time Lehi left Jerusalem, "the Babylonian army would probably have already destroyed the family property as soldiers took control of the neighboring countryside. After all, both archaeology and the Lachish letters demonstrate that the Babylonians systematically destroyed all settlements within fifty miles of Jerusalem before beginning the initial siege."[2]

Such speculation appears to be inaccurate. One cannot rely on a single external source, John Bright's book, *A History of Israel*, as the basis for the speculation[3] and still maintain the rational principle of thoroughness. Bright wrote, "The land had been completely wrecked. Its cities destroyed, its economy ruined, its leading citizens killed or deported, the population consisted

---

[1]   John Bright, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), XLVI-XLVIII; J. Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, R.K. Harrison, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 22-24.

[2]   S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 27.

[3]   Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 32 n.16.

chiefly of poor peasants considered incapable of making trouble."[4] For these claims, Bright only cited verses in 2 Kings 25:12 and Jeremiah 52:16, neither of which states that the land had been wrecked, the cities destroyed or the economy ruined, and both of which refer only to farmers remaining in Judah to tend their lands. Evidently, the farmers' properties and villages (at least in some regions of the land of Judah) had not been destroyed. The *kingdom* of Judah, a political and economic system with many participants, had been "completely wrecked" and replaced by the empire of Babylonia. However, much of the productive land and the farmsteads and villages from which it was worked and even the fortified city of Mizpah, all were preserved.

During and after the two sieges that brought Zedekiah to power and then deposed him, the Babylonians left many farmers in place to produce food for their army and empire (2 Kings 24:14; 25:12). When Jeremiah was released from prison, he lived with "the people that were left in the land" (Jeremiah 40:6; 39:14). News of Gedaliah's appointment as Babylonian governor at the undestroyed city of Mizpah[5] (apparently located about eight miles north of Jerusalem) reached Jewish escapees in nearby areas like Moab, Ammon and Edom and those people returned to work the land (Jeremiah 40:10-12). Thus, even *after* the destruction of Jerusalem and the other rebellious cities, the murmuring ones in Lehi's group might have wanted and assumed they could have the same sort of future for themselves as the other refugees who returned to work the land.

Two extreme scholarly opinions have been advanced about the post-Zedekiah landscape of Judah. "On the one hand, one suggested a total destruction of Judah and a high number of deportees, which significantly reduced the population of Judah (W.F. Albright, D.L. Smith); on the other hand, others minimized the extent and impact of the deportations and stressed the continuity of life for the great majority in Judah (M. Noth, H. Barstad)."[6] According to Oded Lipschits, neither view accurately depicts what occurred in all parts of the land. Even before the destruction of Jerusalem, "[m]any of those who did not believe that the rebellion could succeed took advantage of the respite [in the Babylonian siege] to 'go to the land of Benjamin' ([Jeremiah] 37:12). They joined the residents of the Benjamin region who had from the start practiced a policy of capitulation to the

---

[4]   John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 331.

[5]   The location of Mizpah of Benjamin has been identified with Nebi Samwil (a height about five miles north of Jerusalem) and with the mound known as Tell en-Nasbeh (about eight miles north of Jerusalem on the road to Samaria). Discoveries at Tell en-Nasbeh fit the statements about Mizpah found in the Hebrew scriptures. "The area within the walls was [about] seven acres. The walls were the most impressive of any Palestinian mound exposed up to that time, with a probable height of some thirty-five to forty feet and a breadth of fifteen to twenty feet. The great gate facing the [north] contained a large court, and in it were benches upon which the elders doubtless sat to adjudicate disputes. All this suggests that it was a place of some importance, in all likelihood the boundary fortress between Judah and Israel. If so, it comports well with the biblical representation of Mizpah. Nebi Samwil has never been thoroughly excavated, but such remains as have been recovered nearly all come from a much later period." "Mizpah," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 3 K-Q* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1962), 407-08. "The evidence in favour of Tell en-Nasbeh is stronger than for Nebi Samwil, because it can be seen how the consonants *mzph* could become *nzbh* phonetically and the archaeological evidence supports the identification." "Mizpah," in J.D. Douglas, ed., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Part 2 Goliath-Papyri* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 1013. See also Bright, *Jeremiah*, 244; Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Nasbeh, Tell En-" in Ephraim Stern, Ayelet Lewinson-Gilboa, and Joseph Aviram, eds., *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 3 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 1098-1102.

[6]   Rainer Albertz, "A Response to Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005," in David Vanderhooft, ed., "In Conversation with Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 7 (2007), 6, accessed online by the author on September 5, 2008, at www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_63.pdf.

Babylonians."[7] The city of Mizpah, probably a Babylonian "headquarters" before the fall of Jerusalem, became a prominent administrative center in the land of Benjamin. "That Mizpah and the surrounding traditional Benjaminite territory continued to flourish has been well known and universally accepted for decades now."[8] Lipschits estimated that "Judah apparently registered a decline of 60% in settled area. This means that, although 110,000 people lived in Judah at the end of the kingdom, only 40,000 remained in the Babylonian province that was established in the same area. The archaeological evidence shows that the time of the Babylonian war against Judah is a sharp cut-off point marking the termination of one of the characteristic features of Judean settlement: large, important cities were laid waste, and urban life effectively came to an end. In contrast, the majority of rural settlements had been in the Judean highlands, particularly in the area between Beth-zur and the Benjamin region; this continued almost unchanged."[9] Urban life declined sharply because the rebellious cities were destroyed, but "rural settlements in the region of Benjamin and in the area between Bethlehem and Beth-Zur" continued to exist along with the administrative fortress at Mizpah.[10]

The answer in the text is clear as to what Lehi's family members wanted when they murmured, even if that murmuring occurred when the destruction of Jerusalem was imminent. They understood farming and they wanted to return to their land (e.g., 1 Nephi 2:4, 11; 5:2; 7:2, 7, 14; 8:1; 16:11; 17:21-22; 18:23-24; 2 Nephi 10:20). In their land, there had been safety and

---

[7]   Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 366.

[8]   H.G.M. Williamson, "Comments on Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*," in Vanderhooft, ed., "In Conversation with Oded Lipschits," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 7 (2007), 35. See also Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Reflections on Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*," in Vanderhooft, ed., "In Conversation with Oded Lipschits," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 7 (2007), 13-14. "Recent research ... suggests that such border fortresses not only controlled military and economic access to Judah, but served an important cultic function as well. Sites like Mizpah may have contained sanctuaries where travelers could offer proper sacrifices to the national lord on entering or leaving the land. This role may explain the origins of Mizpah's subsequent cultic importance in Judah, and Hosea's vague condemnation against the priests, who 'have been a snare at Mizpah' (Hos. 5:1).... In the chaotic period after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (586 B.C.E.), however, Mizpah achieved its greatest significance. The Babylonian invasion probably devastated most of the cities of [south] and [west] Judah, including Jerusalem, but seemingly left the remote [north] redoubt of Mizpah intact. At this fortress, the newly appointed, pro-Babylonian governor Gedaliah set up his motley government and established a new capital (2 Kgs 25:23); there the nationalistic Ishmael assassinated the quisling and most of his puppet government as well (2 Kgs 25:25; but see the extended account of these events in Jer 40:1-41:16).... It is likely that Mizpah retained its status as capital of Judah and primary temple for many decades, until the reestablishment of Jerusalem late in the 6th century B.C.E. It is also possible that postexilic literary circles were active in the city during this period, which may account for its inclusion and legitimation in premonarchical stories such as Judges 20, 1 Samuel 7, and possibly Judges 11.... During the Maccabean Revolt in the 2d century B.C.E., Jewish fundamentalist forces under Judas assembled for a religious service in Mizpah in memory of its former preeminence as a holy place (1 Macc 3:46)." "Mizpah," in David Noel Freedman, ed.-in-chief, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 4 K-N* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 880. "Prosperity is also suggested by architectural remains, the massive gate, a large number of cisterns and silos, some dye-plants, numerous spinning-whorls, loom-weights, wine and oil presses, pottery, beads of semi-precious stones, pins, bangles and metal jewellery. The city expanded beyond its walls during the Iron II period [roughly 920 to 538 B.C.], but began to decline in the 5th century BC." "Mizpah," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Part 2 Goliath-Papyri*, 1013-14.

[9]   Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*, 368. See also Donald J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1983), 37-38.

[10]   Oded Lipschits, "The Babylonian Period in Judah: In Search of the Half Full Cup," in Vanderhooft, ed., "In Conversation with Oded Lipschits," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 7 (2007), 44-45.

prosperity before, during and after the decades of political upheaval that eventually gave power to Zedekiah and that might take it away from him. The murmuring ones seem to have expected safety and prosperity in the land of their inheritance, no matter what had been prophesied for Zedekiah and his rebellious court, and their followers in Jerusalem and the other rebellious cities. I might assume that Lehi's land was in the region of Benjamin or perhaps in the hill country north of Beth-Zur.[11] If so, then archaeological evidence and interpretation might provide some relevant factual foundation for the belief of the murmuring ones in Lehi's group that they would continue to prosper in the land,[12] but such an assumption is not required by either the early or late departure theory. No special assumptions are necessary to understand and interpret the murmuring, notwithstanding the impending destruction of the rebellious cities. The desire to return is not a genuine textual issue about Lehi's escape either early or late in Zedekiah's reign.

---

[11] The land of Benjamin may have been the more likely location since both Lehi and Ishmael appear to have been descendants of Joseph. Lehi was descended through Joseph's son Manasseh (1 Nephi 5:14; Alma 10:3). Ishmael descended from Joseph through his son Ephraim, according to a recollection of a statement by Joseph Smith. Sidney B. Sperry, "Did Father Lehi Have Daughters Who Married the Sons of Ishmael," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 236. The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are reported to have settled north of Jerusalem (Joshua 13:29-31; 16-17). See also Map 5 in *The Holy Bible* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979); and Maps 6-7 in James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, Rev. ed., Frederick C. Grant and H. H. Rowley, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

[12] Nephi, however, had received contrary information from the Lord, which he expressed to his relatives in the form of a prophetic warning: "Now, behold, I say unto you that if ye will return unto Jerusalem ye shall also perish with them. And now, if ye have choice, go up to the land, and remember the words which I speak unto you, that if ye go ye will also perish; for thus the Spirit of the Lord constraineth me that I should speak" (1 Nephi 7:15). Skousen interpreted the phrase *if ye have choice* to be "apparently idiomatic and ... equivalent to the modern English 'if you choose', meaning 'if you wish'." Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: 1 Nephi 1-2 Nephi 10* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), *Part One*, 149.