Part 9: Was Jeremiah Cast into Prison Before Zedekiah's Reign?

Randall P. Spackman

If Lehi escaped from Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah, then while it is not likely, it might be possible that Nephi referred to an imprisonment of Jeremiah (1 Nephi 7:14) that occurred shortly before the reign of Zedekiah began. The principle of thoroughness also requires me to search for any reliable information that indicates an earlier imprisonment of Jeremiah. A search of the book of Jeremiah identifies three instances during Jehoiakim's reign when Jeremiah was restrained. However, as evidence that might be related to Nephi's reference to Jeremiah's imprisonment, these three restraints do not hold up under logical scrutiny.

To begin with, an attempt to execute Jeremiah occurred at the very beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (about 609 B.C.). This was "the occasion of a national gathering at the Temple, perhaps the festival of the New Year associated with the coronation of Jehoiakim." Jeremiah attended the event and "preached a sermon denouncing the false reliance upon the Temple as a place of refuge, calling the people to amend their conduct, and reminding them of the evil fate that had befallen Shiloh" during the time of the Judges (Judges 21, 1 Samuel 1). The text of Jeremiah's speech (Jeremiah 7:1-15) is "paralleled by the account of [Jeremiah] 26, which describes the outrage of the priests and princes, how Jeremiah almost lost his life, the prophet's eloquent defence, and the verdict of the people."[1] Powerful nobles helped arrange for Jeremiah's release (Jeremiah 26:16, 24). This instance of restraint (about eleven years before Zedekiah's reign began) was far too early to have been used by Nephi to influence his brothers and more importantly, it did not involve Jeremiah being cast into prison.

In the fifth year of Jehoiakim[2] (about six years before Zedekiah's reign), "Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, I am *shut up*; I cannot go into the house of the Lord: Therefore go thou, and read in the [scroll], which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the Lord in the ears of the people in the Lord's house upon the fasting day" (Jeremiah 36:5-6, emphasis added). The Hebrew word translated *shut up* (*'āṣûr*) describes a condition of being restrained, either to be held back or held in, and it is used in many Biblical contexts.[3] For example, in Jeremiah 20:9, the word of the Lord that Jeremiah is commanded to speak is like a fire in his heart, *shut up* in his bones. Sarai, Abram's wife, expressed her belief that the Lord *restrained* her from bearing children (Genesis 16:2). In 1 Kings 18:44, the rain is not to *stop* Ahab. Similarly, in Job 29:9, the princes

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1   James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, Rev. ed., Frederick C. Grant and H. H. Rowley, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 468 ("Jeremiah"). See also John Bright, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), XCVI-XCVIII, 167-172; 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), 521-28.

2   The Septuagint text places this event in Jehoiakim's eighth year, more than three years before Zedekiah's reign. William L. Holladay, citing comments by Wilhelm Rudolph and Norbert Lohfink, preferred the Septuagint date and connected the fast referred to in Jeremiah 36:9 with "the great drought presupposed by [Jeremiah] 14:1—15:9." William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 4-5.

3   James Strong, "A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible," in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 91; see also Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 783-84; William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 281.

refrained from talking and put their hands over their mouths. Daniel's vision of the kings includes an instance where the king's daughter of the south cannot *retain* her power (Daniel 11:6). Asa's prayer includes a petition that the Ethiopians not be allowed to *prevail* against the Lord (2 Chronicles 14:11). There are many more instances where the basic idea of restraint is indicated by the word '*āṣûr* (e.g., Deuteronomy 11:17; 32:36; 1 Kings 8:35; 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kings 9:8; 14:26; 17:4; 2 Chronicles 6:26; 7:13; Nehemiah 6:10).

The word '*āṣûr* (again translated *shut up*) appears in Jeremiah 33:1, where it refers to Jeremiah's restraint or imprisonment in the court of the guard house after he had been arrested late in Zedekiah's reign. The word is also utilized in Jeremiah 39:15, where it refers to the same restraint. In Jeremiah 36:5 (quoted in the paragraph immediately above), the word describes Jeremiah's restraint with respect to the temple. However, it is not logical to translate '*āṣûr* as "imprisoned" in Jeremiah 36:5 because Jeremiah 36:26 makes it clear that Jehoiakim could still order Jeremiah's arrest and Jeremiah 36:19 proves that the prophet could still hide. The word '*āṣûr* in Jeremiah 36:5 probably means that Jeremiah was "forbidden to enter the temple; or perhaps it was simply that the authorities had him under observation and would stop him if he tried to speak there."[4] Hence, this instance of being restrained is not consistent with Nephi's description of Jeremiah being cast into prison. Jeremiah had not yet been arrested and he was able to go into hiding, so that he escaped from being cast into prison and possibly killed by Jehoiakim.

To the contrary, one might claim that the word '*āṣûr* was "ambiguous."[5] Based on that erroneous assumption, one might also claim that the word '*āṣûr* in Jeremiah 36:5 may have meant "some sort of formal or informal imprisonment."[6] However, that would overlook or ignore the text at Jeremiah 36:19 and 26. The word '*āṣûr* is not ambiguous and the idea that Jeremiah was *shut up,* in the sense of being imprisoned, is "widely rejected."[7]

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[4]   Bright, *Jeremiah*, 179. See also Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 659, "I am restrained, I am unable to enter the house of Yahweh;" Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 592, "I am under restraint; I am not able to enter the house of Yahweh;" Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Jeremiah," in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 517, "Jeremiah is barred from the temple;" Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 623, "Jeremiah had been forbidden to enter the temple precincts."

[5]   See, e.g., David Rolph Seely and JoAnn H. Seely, "Lehi & Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests & Patriarchs," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 28; and S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *The Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001):19. Although both of these articles include citations to some of Holladay's work on the book of Jeremiah, neither of the articles provides a citation to his claim that '*āṣûr* is "ambiguous." See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 255. A word may be said to be "ambiguous" if its meaning is "[d]oubtful, questionable; indistinct, obscure, not clearly defined" or if it can have "more than one interpretation, or explanation; of double meaning, or of several possible meanings; equivocal (The commonest use.)" *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary,* two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I: 68 ("Ambiguous"). The fact that various translators use different English words in different contexts to reflect the meaning of '*āṣûr* (restraint: to be held back or held in) does not make '*āṣûr* ambiguous; it merely reflects the multitude of words available in the English language and the choice of the translators. Holladay's claim of ambiguity in Jeremiah 36:5 seems to be because of this multiplicity of English words and because "[t]here is no way to know why he would have been restricted." Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 255. But that last reason is beside the point. Jeremiah may state unequivocally that he is restrained from doing something without explaining why. Jeremiah 36:19 and 26 make it perfectly clear that Jeremiah was not restrained in prison or in custody.

[6]   Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 20.

[7]   Jack R. Lundbom, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah 21-36* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 592. See also Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 659.

A third restraint, a violent physical punishment (perhaps connected with an imprisonment), was inflicted on Jeremiah during the reign of Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 20:1-6) and this incident also must be examined carefully. The punishment was a consequence of events that began with the Lord commanding Jeremiah to buy a potter's earthenware bottle. Then, just outside the Potsherd Gate of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was commanded by the Lord to break the bottle in the presence of priests and elders, and to speak a prophecy concerning the destruction of the city (Jeremiah 19:1-13). This he did, as commanded by the Lord, but then he went to the temple and prophesied something similar there (Jeremiah 19:14-15). The temple overseer, Pashur, heard Jeremiah's proclamation in the temple and had the prophet arrested, beaten and put in the stocks overnight (Jeremiah 20:1-6).[8] This incident is "the only biographical account in the book that carries no indication of date and, indeed, one of the few that are not dated precisely."[9] Without further evidence, I would violate the principle of rational reserve if I claimed that Jeremiah was put in the stocks shortly before the first year of Zedekiah.[10] Both J. Arthur Thompson and John Bright suggested a time for Jeremiah's night in the stocks that was *before* the prophet was restrained with respect to the temple (that is, perhaps four to seven years before Zedekiah's reign);[11] they thought the restraint against Jeremiah entering the temple (Jeremiah 36:5-6) may have been "an outgrowth" of Jeremiah being placed in the stocks.[12]

Such an interpretation of the three restraints on Jeremiah during the reign of Jehoiakim is logical and based on relevant text, and it assumes plausible motivations and consequences.[13] Moreover, these three restraints point to an important reason *not* to assume that Jeremiah was cast into prison late in the reign of Jehoiakim. Jeremiah was protected by powerful nobles from being executed by the mob (Jeremiah 26).[14] At about the same time, the prophet Urijah was

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[8]   "That the incident took place in Jehoiakim's reign may be accepted as certain. The fact that Pashhur is here the temple overseer, while in [Jeremiah 29:26]—which dates ... to 594 [B.C., in Zedekiah's reign]—we find another man occupying that position, would argue that Pashhur was among those deported in 597." Bright, *Jeremiah*, 174. See also Jeremiah 20:6.

[9]   Bright, *Jeremiah*, 174.

[10]   Seely and Seely gave the date of this incident as 601 B.C. (more than three years before Zedekiah's enthronement), relying on the chronology of events proposed in Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 1-10. Seely and Seely, "Lehi and Jeremiah," 28, 85 n.10. They did not acknowledge that the date of this incident does not appear in the ancient record and thus, cannot be known. The 601 B.C. date was reiterated in Brown and Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment," 20, again without any hint of the speculative nature of the date. Holladay's dating of the incident in 601 B.C. is based partly on the theory that "the text [of the book of Jeremiah is] a chronological unfolding of events and utterances" from Jeremiah's life. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 407. Holladay openly acknowledged at the beginning of his chronology of Jeremiah's career, "Almost every suggestion that I offer here could be challenged, and some are quite different from anything heretofore proposed." Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 1. This hardly seems the sort of circumstance in which the principles of thoroughness, uncertain cultural understanding and rational reserve would indicate one might flatly state that Jeremiah was beaten and put in the stocks "in 601 B.C." The matter is far from being settled and in any principled interpretation, it must be treated that way.

[11]   See footnote 2 and accompanying text. Bright and Thompson relied on the date in the Masoretic text (the fifth year of Jehoiakim), rather than the date in the Septuagint text (the eighth year of Jehoiakim). Bright, *Jeremiah*, 174-75; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 445-46.

[12]   Bright, *Jeremiah*, 174-75; Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 445-46.

[13]   See also Bright, *Jeremiah*, XCIX.

[14]   "In the reign of Jehoiakim (608-598 B.C.), Jeremiah was already a mature man and prophet, versed in the international events that led to the battle of Carchemish in 605 ([Jeremiah] 46:2-12). He collected his previous sayings into one scroll (chap. 36) and dared to assault the king (22:13-19) and the Temple (26:1-

arrested and executed by Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:20-23). Clearly, once Jehoiakim's forces arrested a prophet, the prophet could be killed. After Jeremiah was barred from the temple and Jehoiakim ordered his arrest (perhaps so he could accomplish what the mob had been unable to do several years earlier), Jeremiah was hidden from the king by the Lord and, apparently, influential nobles (Jeremiah 36).[15]

Given that Jeremiah had such powerful protectors, on what basis would I now think I am free to speculate that those same nobles forgot Jeremiah, failed to hide him and allowed Jehoiakim to cast the prophet into prison just before the reign of Zedekiah? On what basis would I assume that Jehoiakim, having captured Jeremiah, then permitted this prophet (unlike Urijah) to escape with his life and leave the prison? On what basis would I assume that such vital and unusual events would not have been recorded by Jeremiah or his followers? The texts discussed above indicate that such assumptions would be inconsistent with the existing textual record.

What does the Book of Mormon require for Jeremiah's imprisonment? The principle of thoroughness also requires me to examine the Book of Mormon as though it might be related to Jeremiah's night in the stocks.[16] For the purpose of this examination, I can observe that the stocks were some sort of punishment or restraining device for mad prophets (Jeremiah 29:26) and perhaps others, and that the stocks may have been inside or part of a building and thus, a real imprisonment (2 Chronicles 16:10). I can assume that the restraint was unwanted and painful. Is such an imprisonment consistent with the Book of Mormon record (1 Nephi 3; 7)?

The first part of the Book of Mormon context to be considered is Nephi's claim that the people of Jerusalem had rejected the prophets (1 Nephi 3:18; 7:14). If I assume that Lehi escaped from Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah's reign, then this claim seems exaggerated. In the first year of Zedekiah's reign, prophets were sent by the Lord to call for repentance (1 Nephi 1:4), an indication, at least, that many people had not yet decisively rejected the Lord and that he was willing to hold open the option of repentance for some period of time (see also 2 Chronicles 36:15-16). Lehi, Ishmael and their families appear to have been among those who were influenced positively by the prophetic message. Zedekiah appears to have sided with Jeremiah, at least to the extent that he chose not to rebel at that time. In Zedekiah's fourth year, the king may have considered rebellion (Jeremiah 27-28), but he sent envoys and may have traveled himself to Babylonia to repeat his commitment to Nebuchadrezzar (Jeremiah 29:3; 51:59-64). Some five years later (about the ninth year of his reign), Zedekiah rebelled, but even after rebelling, he consulted with Jeremiah through messengers (Jeremiah 37:3-10) or personally (Jeremiah 37:17-20). The work of the Lord continued during the time when the Babylonian siege was lifted and many seem to have finally heeded the Spirit-inspired message and escaped from the city (Jeremiah 21:1-10; 38:1-3). Then, the Babylonians returned to destroy the city and its remaining inhabitants, with exceptions of course, such as Jeremiah and Ebed-melech (Jeremiah 39:11-18). Even at that late date, Jeremiah informed Zedekiah that the Lord was willing to spare the city if

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19). At that time he found friends and protectors within the noble families of Jerusalem, the sons of Shaphan (26:24; 36:10, 25) and of Neriah (e.g., 36:4)." Alexander Rofé, "Jeremiah," in Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *The HarperCollins Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 490.

[15] Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 100.

[16] "Following the beating, Pashhur put [Jeremiah] in the stocks (*mahpeket*). There is some difficulty with this word. The Targum has 'prison.' There is at least the possibility that Jeremiah was placed in a small confined room used for short detentions. The root *hpk* means 'turn over,' which has given rise to the idea of *stocks*. But a confined room would just as well have kept a man in a crooked or confined position which would produce cramped muscles (cf. [Jeremiah] 29:26; 2 [Chronicles] 16:10; this latter verse adds 'in prison')." Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 454.

Zedekiah would repent and surrender (Jeremiah 38:14-23). Thus, as to the question of a decisive rejection of the prophets (1 Nephi 3:18; 7:14) in a way that would bring about the total destruction of the city, the Hebrew scriptures suggest that such a condition did not occur until very late in Zedekiah's reign.

Next, if Lehi came out of Jerusalem in Zedekiah's first year, then Nephi's declaration that Jeremiah had been *cast into prison* (1 Nephi 7:14), apparently in some sort of life-threatening way, also seems exaggerated. Nephi used the imprisonment of Jeremiah to support a series of five prophecies related to Jerusalem's destruction and the impending death of any in Lehi's group who chose to return to Jerusalem (1 Nephi 7:12-15). This suggests that Jeremiah's imprisonment was life-threatening to the prophet and thus, similar to the threat against Lehi and the potential threats against Nephi's relatives. Such threats appear to have been urgent and alarming to Nephi.

The life of Jeremiah had been in peril for years and then he suffered a beating and a night in the stocks. This was a violent and painful imprisonment, but the next day he was released. The prophet's imprisonment was evidence of official rejection at the temple, but not at that time a threat on his life. If Jeremiah's temporary imprisonment occurred shortly before Zedekiah came to power (which cannot be proven), why did Nephi not mention Jeremiah's night in the stocks when he was trying to get his brothers focused on obtaining the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:18)? And how seriously should the rebellious sons of Lehi have taken the danger to their father?

Without diminishing Jeremiah's suffering in any manner, the night he spent in the stocks seems like an event that Nephi could not have relied upon in any effective argument against his brothers. From their perspective, if Lehi's group returned to the land of Jerusalem and they could not hide or protect their father, then Lehi might be arrested, beaten, humiliated as a mad prophet, hurt in the stocks and finally released to the comforting of his family. The mere possibility of such a brief imprisonment for a mad prophet would not have been a reason for the rebellious brothers to leave their land, comforts and economic prospects behind. From their perspective, their father was "a visionary man" who followed "the foolish imaginations of his heart" (1 Nephi 2:11).

If I pay attention to Nephi's choice of words in 1 Nephi 7:14 (*cast into prison*), I may also note that the Hebrew scriptures contain instances of Jeremiah being mobbed and almost killed (Jeremiah 26), beaten and put in the stocks overnight (Jeremiah 20:1-6) and restrained from entering or speaking in the temple (Jeremiah 36:5); and the Hebrew scriptures contain one occurrence where Jeremiah is described as being *cast* into prison (Jeremiah 38:6, 9). For an adult male to be *cast* anywhere might suggest physical action and if the action was against his will and unjustified, it would be resisted if at all possible. Jeremiah 38:6 states: "Then took they Jeremiah, and *cast* him into the [cistern] of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the [guard house]: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the [cistern] there was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire" (emphasis added).[17]

The English word *cast* in Jeremiah 38:6 is a translation of the Hebrew word *shâlâk*, meaning to throw out, down or away.[18] Since the word *cast* is used in the same context as *let*

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[17]   Holladay noted that the Septuagint version does not mention the use of ropes when Jeremiah was cast into the cistern. He also claimed that the verbs "throw" and "let down" were "hardly sequential actions," but that claim would seem to assume a docile prisoner. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 266.

[18]   James Strong, "A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible," in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 117. The word *shâlâk* appears throughout the Hebrew scriptures (e.g., Genesis 37:20, 22, 24; Exodus 7:9-10, 12; 32:19, 24; Jeremiah 7:15, 29;14:16; 26:23).

down Jeremiah with cords, a scuffle might have ensued with the officers grabbing and holding Jeremiah to tie him, and then having to force him into the mouth of the cistern. His headlong fall might have been prevented or broken by ropes tied to his arms because he was lowered into the mud. His rescuers later brought old clothes for him to stuff under his armpits, perhaps to prevent further injury and to ease the pain of lifting him out of the cistern by ropes strung under his armpits (Jeremiah 38:6, 11-12). Jeremiah 38:9 reports part of Ebed-melech's plea to Zedekiah: "My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have *cast* into the [cistern]; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is ..." (emphasis added). With this reference to hunger, Ebed-Melech's report and plea to Zedekiah might indicate that Jeremiah had not been, or had not only been, *cast down* in physical violence, but *cast away*—disregarded and simply left to die of starvation. This faithful servant not only reported the events that had occurred, but he obtained Zedekiah's approval to have Jeremiah removed from the cistern (Jeremiah 38:10-13). Then, Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard house (Jeremiah 38:13), where he was restrained ('*āṣûr*) until the Babylonians released him (Jeremiah 33:1; 39:11-14).

First Nephi 7 records Nephi's efforts to convince his rebellious relatives to join Lehi at the base camp by the Red Sea. He reminded them that the Lord had delivered them from Laban, but he warned them that they would lose their lives if they returned to Jerusalem. A central support for his argument was the fact that the wicked at Jerusalem had rejected the prophets. As further evidence of the treacherous forces then controlling Jerusalem, Nephi reminded his family that wicked ones at Jerusalem sought to kill their father and had *cast* Jeremiah into prison (apparently, with the intent to immobilize him in the mud and let him starve).

If, in fact, Jeremiah was cast into prison shortly before, during or shortly after Zedekiah's first regnal year, then there exists an unusual and material void in the record about Jeremiah. That void cannot now be filled by wishful speculation inconsistent with the textual record. My search for textual support has come up empty-handed. In a last attempt to avoid finding Mormon's preface in Third Nephi to be an error, my study will need to be redirected to find, if possible, a logical basis for an interpretation of 2 Nephi 25:10 and 1 Nephi 7:14 that would support the idea that Lehi escaped from Jerusalem in Zedekiah's first regnal year.