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In 1961, Israeli military engineers were constructing a security road on the Israeli side of the former West Bank border with Jordan, a few kilometers east of Moshav Lachish. As their bulldozer cut a path through the hilly countryside, it suddenly cracked into an ancient Judean tomb carved into the bedrock. The machine broke away the roof of the tomb's entry chamber before the crew realized what had happened. But the tomb's two burial chambers were spared, and on the benches of those chambers were eight ancient human skeletons. Tombs of this type are called burial caves by Israeli archaeologists. Several drawings and inscriptions in ancient Hebrew were crudely cut into the tomb's entry chamber walls, including the divine name Jehovah (*Yahuweh*) and the ancient city name Jerusalem (*Yerushalem*). Because of this, the burial cave soon became known to archaeologists as the Jerusalem Cave. But a decade later some Latter-day Saints nicknamed it the "Lehi Cave."

The term "Lehi Cave" was inspired by the abandoned ruins of a medieval Arab village called Khirbet Beit Lei located a few hundred meters from the tomb. The Arabic word *khirbet* means "ruin." The name Beit Lei (بيت ليّ) is pronounced "bait lay" in Arabic; the term *lei* (ليّ) means "twisting."[1] But some Church members interested in the cave became convinced that the place must anciently have been known as Lehi. Theories developed about how the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi and his family might have been connected to the site. Since the

Photo by Jeffrey R. Chadwick, August 2008

Fig. 1. Interior of the Jerusalem Cave, located near Khirbet Beit Lei in Israel. The roof of the cave is missing, and the view here, looking west, shows the two interior burial chambers, each with a triple bench design. The artificial cave was cut out by ancient Judeans, probably in the eighth century BC, as a tomb site for burial of deceased persons. This tomb has been called the Lehi Cave by some Latter-day Saints.

early 1970s many thousands of members have been told about a Lehi Cave and a place called Beit Lehi in classes and firesides, in commentaries and video presentations, and on the Internet. Hundreds of Latter-day Saint tourists to Israel have been taken to the ruins at Khirbet Beit Lei and told that a "city of Lehi" may have existed there, that the prophet Lehi himself had resided in the area, and that the family of Lehi had hidden themselves in the nearby burial cave. Eager to find archaeological support for Nephi's account, many Church members accepted these claims as facts. But are they?

The questions surrounding the Khirbet Beit Lei site and discoveries are essentially issues of archaeology. Until now, however, none of the commentaries or media proposing connections between the Book of Mormon and Beit Lei have been evaluated by an archaeologist with expertise in the land of Israel. Accordingly, the Religious Studies Center and the Maxwell Institute at Brigham Young University asked if I would revisit, research, and evaluate Khirbet Beit Lei and the nearby Jerusalem Cave to address the claims made by parties who

attempt to connect the sites to the narrative in 1 Nephi. As this article proceeds, I will first relate those claims, quoting from the proponents' own publications, video presentations, and Internet sites. Then I will survey the publications and remarks of professional archaeologists and epigraphers concerning the Jerusalem Cave and Khirbet Beit Lei. It will also be necessary to review all the existing Latter-day Saint literature concerning Beit Lehi and Lehi Cave issues, including views both pro and con. Finally, my own conclusions on these issues will be presented in a question-and-answer format.

Origin of the Lehi Cave and Beit Lehi Ideas

Virtually all commentaries promoting the idea of a Lehi Cave and a Beit Lehi area identify Israeli anthropologist Joseph Ginat as the source of these proposals. Ginat studied for his doctorate at the University of Utah in the early 1970s and received a PhD in cultural anthropology in 1975. He specialized in Arab culture and served in several capacities as an adviser on Arab affairs for various Israeli governments. He taught anthropology as a professor at the University of Haifa for many years. Since his first experience in Utah, Ginat has been a friend of the Latter-day Saint community. By all accounts, it was Ginat who, in the early 1970s, introduced his Latter-day Saint friends (including W. Cleon Skousen and Glenn J. Kimber) to the notion that Khirbet Beit Lei was to be identified with the biblical site called Lehi in the Old Testament story of Samson (see Judges 15:8–19) and that the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi and his family were also linked to the area. Referring to the Beit Lei area as "Lehi," Skousen published the following concerning Ginat's views:

> Dr. Ginat pointed out that not only could the ruins of the ancient community of Lehi have been the residence of the prophet Lehi but the nearby cave very well could have been the hideout for Nephi, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Zoram. Dr. Ginat feels that after the death of Laban the sons of Lehi would have felt compelled to go into hiding until the state of alarm had subsided. They would therefore have chosen some extremely obscure place with which they were familiar and where they knew they could obtain food and water. Dr. Ginat states that the cave of Beit Lehi fits all of these requirements in every respect.
>
> He further emphasizes that the Book of Mormon says these men were gone so long that their own mother gave up hope of their ever returning and went into mourning, thinking they were dead. This circumstance confirms the idea that they were in hiding for a long time and could have written the inscriptions on the wall of the Beit Lehi cave indicating that eventually Jerusalem would be redeemed.[2]

A slightly different version of Ginat's views appeared on beitlehi.org, a Web site that was maintained by Kimber (Skousen's son-in-law), currently the most prominent of the Beit Lehi advocates. According to Kimber, Ginat "wondered if this cave could be the 'cavity in a rock' [*sic*] where Nephi said he and his brothers took refuge when they were being pursued by Laban as recorded in 1 Nephi 3:13–27."[3] The site referred to the tomb near Khirbet Beit Lei as a "treasure cave"[4] but did not mention that it was constructed as a man-made sepulchre for the burial of human remains. Continuing the story of Ginat's fascination with the site, Kimber's account reports a meeting with a local Arab:

> Joseph Ginat's interest concerning the cave caused him to go back to Israel and investigate the site. While doing so he was surprised to meet a Bedouin who told him that just above this cave, about ¼ of a mile away, were the remains of an ancient oak tree. This was the place where, according to the traditions and the legends of the Bedouins, a Prophet named Lehi sat while he blessed and judged the people of Ishmael as well as the people of Judah. The Bedouin said that Lehi lived many years before Muhammad. The Arab people built a wall of large rocks around the remains of the tree to protect it as a sacred spot. Upon returning to Salt Lake City, Joseph excitedly shared this information with W. Cleon Skousen as well as others in the area.[5]

Neither Kimber nor Skousen clarifies whether the Arab man used the Arabic name Lei (pronounced "lay") or the Hebrew name Lehi (pronounced "lěkhi"). In Skousen's commentary the name of the Arab man is given, along with his hometown: "Where does the origin of the name Beit Lehi come from? Bedouins, the nomad inhabitants of the area, whose traditions and legends are transmitted from generation to generation, have an interesting version. One of those settled Bedouins, Mahmoud Ali Hassan Jaaoui, who lives in the neighboring village of Idna and who dwells with his flock during the spring months in a cave of a nearby hill, said that the place is called after an Israelite prophet by the name of Lehi who in ancient days was sitting under an old oak tree judging his people."[6]

The story of the "Lehi Cave" and the "ruin of the house of Lehi" spread quickly throughout the Latter-day Saint community during the 1970s and 1980s, mostly by word of mouth in fireside talks and classroom presentations, but also in seemingly authoritative publications. Skousen and Kimber eventually produced a high-quality film presentation entitled *The Lehi Cave*, released for sale to the public in 1986 as a VHS videocassette through Living Scriptures, Inc.[7] Skousen stars in the thirty-minute film, teaching a group of tourists on-site at Khirbet Beit

Lei and the Jerusalem Cave; Joseph Ginat is featured on-site in the film as well. The fact that the cave is a man-made tomb is not mentioned at all in the presentation; only the cave's inscriptions and drawings receive attention. The film suggests that while the prophet Lehi lived in Jerusalem, the Beit Lei area must have been his land of inheritance, that his ancestors had lived at the site, and that Lehi himself spent time there, prophesying to the people of the area. The film also implies that Lehi's "treasure" was hidden in the Lehi Cave and speculates that Nephi and his brothers hid in the cave after the slaying of Laban (though neither of these notions is mentioned in the text of 1 Nephi). To provide background for these propositions, the film suggests that Lehi's ancestors originally hailed from the ancient tribal area of Manasseh in the Northern Kingdom of Israel but had left Israel around 721 BC (incident to the Assyrian conquest of Samaria) if not earlier, moving to the Southern Kingdom of Judah and settling in the Beit Lei area, which, it is suggested, must have been called Lehi from the time of Samson centuries earlier. Lehi himself was born at Jerusalem, the film maintains, because his family suddenly left Beit Lehi to move to the capital at the time of the Assyrian attack on Judah (701 BC) when all other cities in Judah were destroyed. At Lehi's birth he was given his name because of his family's former residence at Beit Lehi, and the film compares this with Jesus being known as Jesus of Nazareth.

The film also features Joseph Ginat interviewing a local Arab gentlemen identified as "Shiekh [*sic*] Muhammad al-Asam," who is asked for the origin of the name Khirbet Beit Lei. Speaking in Arabic, al-Asam answers that it is named for Nebi Lei, which means "the prophet Lei" (al-Asam pronounces the name as "lay," but in the dubbed English translation Ginat renders it as "nabi lah-ee," quite deliberately altering the vowels and pronouncing the name with two syllables). The film's announcer adds that "Arabs believe the prophet Lehi brought his people here to teach them." The film also reports that Skousen and Ginat felt that a church would have been built at the site anciently in order to honor the memory of the prophet Lehi and that the spot chosen was where Israeli archaeologists Joseph Patrich and Yoram Tsafrir discovered a Byzantine-era chapel during a brief excavation in 1983. Tsafrir is also featured in the film, discussing the significance of the chapel. Skousen is shown teaching a group of tourists at the site as they examine the chapel's exquisite mosaic tile floor, which features Greek inscriptions and artistic renditions, including a ship with a mast and a sail.

A partial summary of the various claims made by Beit Lehi and Lehi Cave proponents includes the following:

1. The Arabic term Lei (pronounced "lay") is the equivalent of the Hebrew term Lehi (לחי, pronounced "lěkhi").

2. The Hebrew term Lehi (לחי) means "cheek" or "jaw," and thus the Arabic term Lei must also mean "cheek" or "jaw."

3. The place-name Khirbet Beit Lei means "ruin of Beit Lehi." Since the word *beit* means "house," the total English translation would be "ruin of the house of Lehi."

4. The Khirbet Beit Lei area was so named because it was anciently called Lehi in the biblical story of Samson (see Judges 15).

5. An old well a short distance from the ruins of Khirbet Beit Lei is identified as En-hakkore (see Judges 15:19), a spring at the biblical site of Samson's Lehi.

6. Khirbet Beit Lei and the wider surrounding area should more properly be referred to as Beit Lehi, or the House of Lehi.

7. The prophet Lehi's ancestors had moved to Judah from Israel and lived at the Beit Lehi site, perhaps in a "city of Lehi" where the ruins at Khirbet Beit Lei now sit.

8. Lehi's ancestors moved to Jerusalem from Beit Lehi at the time the Assyrians were destroying all the other cities of Judah (701 BC).

9. Lehi himself was named after the place Beit Lehi, just as some other biblical personalities carried the name of a place of origin (such as Jesus of Nazareth).

10. Though Lehi himself lived at Jerusalem, he spent time at Beit Lehi and had a residence there.

11. Some local Arabs assert that the origin of the name Khirbet Beit Lei is from an ancient prophet named Nebi Lei who judged his people at the site.

12. The prophet Lehi would have sat under an oak tree at Khirbet Beit Lei and judged his people and prophesied unto them.

13. The Beit Lei area was actually Lehi's land of inheritance where he deposited his gold, silver, and other wealth in a treasure cave.

14. The burial cave near Khirbet Beit Lei was the specific location where Lehi hid his silver and gold.

15. Lehi's family would have passed by Khirbet Beit Lei and the burial cave on their journey to the Red Sea.

16. Lehi's sons, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi, hid in the burial cave when pursued by Laban (see 1 Nephi 3:13–27).

17. Lehi's four sons and Zoram hid in the burial cave after the death of Laban to avoid capture by Judean forces (an idea not reported in the text of 1 Nephi).

18. Someone in Lehi's party, either himself or his son Nephi, was the source of the seemingly prophetic inscriptions found inside the burial cave.

19. The crude drawings of ships found in the burial cave were also made by Lehi's party, perhaps in anticipation of their future travel by ship to a land of promise.

20. The Byzantine chapel at Khirbet Beit Lei, which also featured a mosaic picture of a ship, was built to honor the memory of the prophet Lehi.

21. Archaeological excavation will eventually reveal a City of Lehi or a settlement called Beit Lehi at the site of Khirbet Beit Lei, dating to 600 BC.

The Archaeological Discoveries at the Jerusalem Cave and Khirbet Beit Lei

A detailed description of the archaeological discoveries at Khirbet Beit Lei and the Jerusalem Cave is now in order. Khirbet Beit Lei is called Ḥorvat Beit Loya or simply Beit Loya (בית לויה) in Hebrew by Israelis, not "Beit Lehi."[1] (As previously mentioned, the name Beit Lei [بيت ليّ] is pronounced "bait lay" in Arabic; the term *lei* [ليّ] means "twisting.")[8] The site is located in the southeastern Shephelah region (low hills) of Israel, about five kilometers southeast of the Beit Guvrin and Tel Mareshah area. Its elevation is about four hundred meters above sea level, and it is accessed by driving eight kilometers east from Lachish

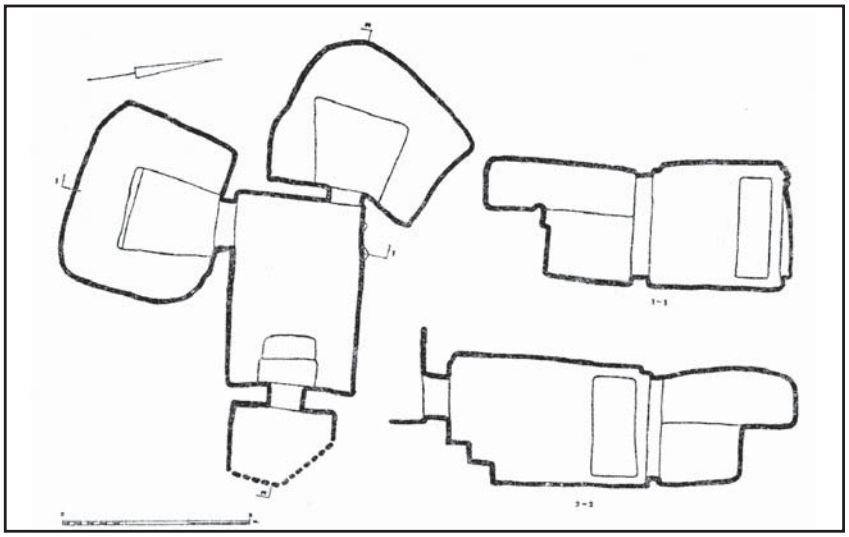

Fig. 2. Plan of the Jerusalem Cave tomb complex (after Naveh, 1963).

toward Amatzia, then turning north, leaving the paved highway, and travelling along a series of unpaved farm and security roads. The ruins at the site are typical of a medieval Arab village. The area lies in an Israeli military firing zone (for weapons training) and is consequently uninhabited. The Jerusalem Cave is a few hundred meters south of the ruins.

Shortly after its discovery in 1961, the tomb which came to be known by Israelis as the Jerusalem Cave (or the so-called Lehi Cave) was excavated by Joseph Naveh on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities. The tomb consisted of a rectangular entry chamber with vertical walls, high cornice decorations, and a floor that measured 2 × 3 meters. Two burial chambers branched off from the entry chamber, one to the south and one to the west (see fig. 2). Both burial chambers measured just under three meters square, and both featured a triple bench design.

Human bones of eight individuals were found intact in deposition on the benches, along with a bronze ring, a bronze earring, and a bronze clasp. No other grave goods were found in the cave. Three skeletons were found in the southern chamber: a young male on the right bench, an older individual of undetermined sex on the center bench, and a middle-aged female on the left bench. The bronze earring was found near this woman's skull. Five skeletons were found in the western chamber: a young female and a child on the right bench, a middle-aged female and a child on the center bench (the bronze clasp was found near this woman's skull), and an adolescent of undetermined sex on the left bench. A small juglet was found outside the tomb's entry, and sherds of a cooking pot were found in the soil accumulated on the entry chamber floor; these ceramics dated to the early Persian Period (537–332 BC). The triple-bench style of the tomb is well recognized as a late Iron Age II design, dating in general from 722 BC to 586 BC. From the entry chamber into the two burial chambers were two high doorways. The outline of a high doorway for a planned third burial chamber (branching north) was found in the entry chamber's north wall, but the planned chamber was never cut out and constructed.

A number of short Hebrew inscriptions were found on the walls of the entry chamber, including four variations of the word *a-r-r* (ארר), meaning "cursed," the implication being perhaps that robbers or intruders entering the tomb would be cursed. Three longer Hebrew inscriptions, designated by Naveh with the letters A, B, and C, became a major focus of interest. Inscription A, consisting of two lines, and Inscription B, consisting of a single line below Inscription A, were both

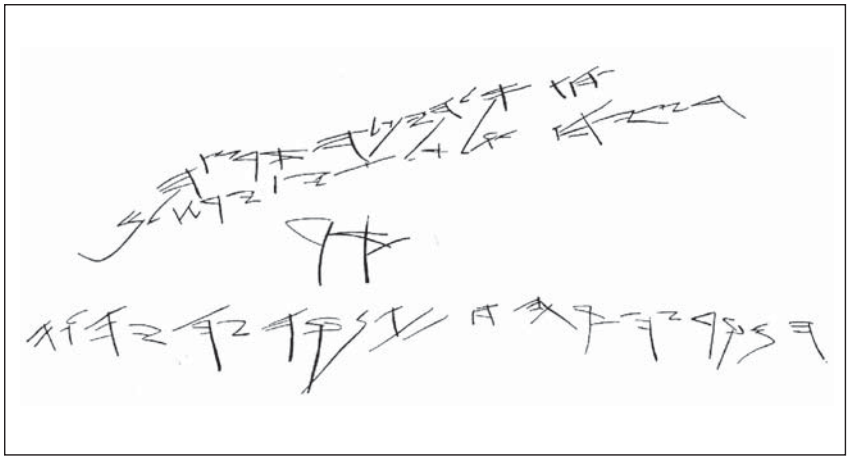

Fig. 3. Inscriptions A and B from the west wall of the burial cave entry chamber (simplified from Cross, 1970).

found on the west wall of the entry chamber (see fig. 3). Inscription C was found on the south wall of the entry chamber.

The three inscriptions were transcribed and translated by Naveh as follows:

A. *yhwh 'lhy kl h'ṣ h* יהוה אלהי כל הארץ ה
ry yhd lw l'lhy yršlm רי יהד לו לאלהי ירושלם

Yahveh (is) the God of the whole earth; the mountains of Judah belong to him, to the God of Jerusalem.[9]

B. *hmwryh 'th ḫnnt nwh yh yhwh* המוריה אתה חננת נוה יה יהוה

The (Mount of) Moriah Thou hast favoured, the dwelling of Yah, Yahveh.[10]

C. *hwšᶜ [y]hwh* הושע [י]הוה

[Ya]hveh deliver (us)![11]

The italicized transliterations of Naveh's Hebrew transcriptions above are based on those provided by Frank Moore Cross Jr. In 1970, Cross, an expert young epigrapher and professor of Hebrew and oriental languages and literature at Harvard University, offered transcriptions and translations of the three inscriptions. His were quite different from those of Naveh in the case of Inscriptions A and B. In his publication, Cross used only italic transliterations of the Hebrew

text he proposed, along with dot word dividers. He read and vocalized the two lines of Inscription A as three poetic elements, "a rubric and a parallelistic bicolon symmetrically balanced in syllable count."[12] He also rendered Inscription B into English in two parallel lines. Cross's readings almost immediately became the authoritative version of the inscriptions throughout the scholarly community:

A.	*[']l[n]y . yhwh [.] 'lhykh . 'rṣ h* *'ry . yhdh wg'lty . yršlm*	
	'ănî yahwê 'elōhêkā	I am Yahweh thy God:
	'erṣē 'ārē yĕhūdā	I will accept the cities of Judah,
	wĕgā'altî yĕrūšālĕm	And will redeem Jerusalem.[13]
B.	*nqh yh 'l ḫmn . nqh yh yhwh*	Absolve (us) O merciful God! Absolve (us) O Yahweh![14]
C.	*hwš' [y]hwh*	Deliver (us) O Lord[15]

French scholar and expert epigrapher Andre Lemaire, professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, offered different transcriptions and translations of the Jerusalem Cave inscriptions in 1976. These appeared only in French and remained essentially unknown to Latter-day Saint parties interested in the Beit Lei area. Lemaire read the three inscriptions as follows:

A.	*yhwh 'lyh kl h'rṣ h* *ry yhwdh l'lhy yršlm*	YHWH is the God of all the earth; the moun- tains of Judah belong to the God of Jerusalem.[16]
B.	*pqd yhwh ḫmn. nqh yh yhwh*	Intervene, merciful YHWH; Absolve Yh-YHWH.[17]
C.	*hwš' [y]hwh*	Save, YHWH.[18]

(These English versions of Lemaire's French renditions were prepared by Ziony Zevit).

Some twenty-five years after Lemaire's contribution appeared, Ziony Zevit, professor of biblical literature and Northwest Semitic languages at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, offered a fourth set of transcriptions and translations of the burial cave inscriptions. Zevit's

readings and renderings, published in 2001, differed significantly from the earlier efforts:

A.	*yhwh 'lhy glh 'rṣh*	YHWH, my god, exposed/laid bare his land.
	'rṣ yhd lw 'l yršlm	A terror he led for his own sake to Jerusalem.[19]
B.	*hmqr yd hyh nqh yd yhwh*	The source smote the hand. Absolve (from culpability) the hand, YHWH.[20]
C.	*hwš' hwh*	Save. Destruction.[21]

In his 1963 assessment, Naveh dated the inscriptions to around 700 BC and attributed them to the period during the reign of King Hezekiah when Judah was attacked by the Assyrian forces of Sennacherib.[22] In 1970, however, Cross dated the inscriptions to at least a century later than that, insisting that they could be no earlier than the sixth century BC.[23] For a few years Cross's dates prevailed over Naveh's among the most scholarly observers, but this was changed in 1976 by Lemaire's expert assessment, which dated the inscriptions on paleographic grounds to the 700 BC horizon, just as Naveh had originally proposed.[24] Zevit's in-depth analysis in 2001 took the same position, which is that the inscriptions must be dated to the period of the 701 BC Assyrian attack on Judah.[25]

In addition to the inscriptions, six drawings were found on the walls of the entry chamber. These included depictions of three human figures, two ships, and a four-sided enclosure with intersecting lines abutted by a less-defined shape. The human figure on the west wall was the best drawn of the three. It is about 19 cm in height and seems to be depicted in a robe and some sort of headgear. The figure has been interpreted as a soldier, perhaps in a stance of prayer (see fig. 4).

The poorly drawn human figure on the north wall is about 32 cm in height and has been interpreted as holding or playing a lyre (see fig. 5).

The human figure on the east doorjamb of the south wall, the least describable of the drawings, is about 43 cm in height and has been interpreted as being in a stance of prayer (see fig. 6).

The two ships, depicted together in a single scene on the south wall, are each about 20 cm long and feature masts and square sails (see fig. 7).

In terms of dating the drawings, which were likely made at the same time as the inscriptions, no characteristic of the human figures or

Fig. 4. Human figure with headgear from the west wall of the entry chamber (after Naveh, 1963).

Fig. 5. Human figure holding lyre (?) from north wall of the entry chamber (after Naveh, 1963).

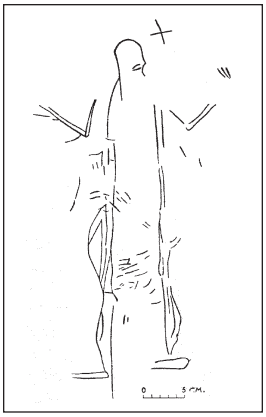

Fig. 6. Human figure from the doorjamb of the south wall of the entry chamber (after Naveh, 1963).

the ships can be exclusively attributed to the period around 700 BC or to the period after 600 BC.

The drawing of the four-sided enclosure on the north wall measures roughly 25 cm square and features intersecting horizontal and vertical lines and a smaller four-sided figure at the intersection of those lines. The Hebrew word *orer* (ארור), meaning "cursed one," was inscribed near the upper right rounded corner of the enclosure (see fig. 8).

The four-sided enclosure was referred to by Naveh as one of "various circles" among the drawings. In a 1963 footnote, he attributed to Yigael Yadin the suggestion that it might be a schematic depiction of an Assyrian camp.[26] Cross and Lemaire offered no suggestions regarding the drawing. In 2001 Zevit offered a well-developed explanation that the four-sided enclosure was a schematic map of the Judean fortress city of Lachish, and the more rounded entity at the right was a depiction of the Assyrian siege ramp built against the southwest side of the tel on which the city sat.[27] A number of aspects of the drawing support this conclusion. The smaller enclosure within the four-sided enclosure would very likely depict the large palace fortress of Lachish (Level III) at the time of the Assyrian attack in 701 BC. The perpendicular lines within the four-sided enclosure probably depict main streets in the Level III town, the western part of which has been partially revealed by excavation. And the orientation of the map, with east at the top, is in keeping with the well-known biblical idiom where east is the forward direction, while north and south are at the left and right respectively.

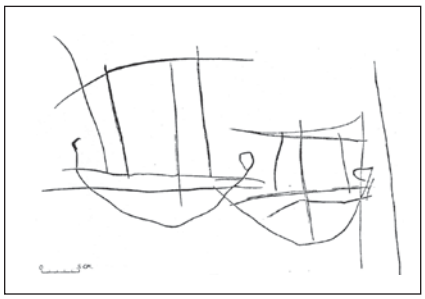

Fig. 7. Depiction of two ships from the south wall of the entry chamber (after Naveh, 1963).

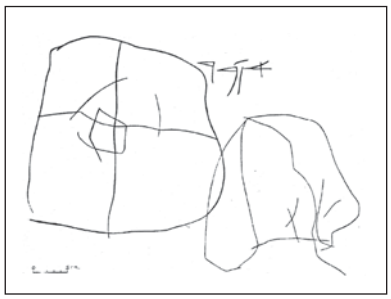

Fig. 8. Depiction of four-sided enclosure from the north wall of the entry chamber (after Naveh, 1963).

Zevit also noted that the depiction reflects a vista from the hill directly west of Lachish, a vantage from which the Assyrian reliefs of Lachish, which were discovered on the walls of Sennacherib's Nineveh palace, were probably also made.[28] Given the close proximity of Lachish to the Jerusalem Cave, Zevit's suggestions seem quite plausible.

The ruins of the ancient village at Khirbet Beit Lei are located just a few hundred meters north of the Jerusalem Cave. However, archaeological investigation has determined that there is no connection between the burial cave and the ancient village during the periods of its occupation. The ruin was surveyed by Israeli archaeologist Yehuda Dagan during the late 1970s as part of a general survey of the Judean hill country. Dagan's survey determined that the village was first settled during the Hellenistic period (beginning 332 BC) and continued through the Roman and Byzantine periods and into the Early Arab period (seventh to eighth centuries AD), after which it was abandoned for several centuries. The village was reoccupied during the Mameluke period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries AD), but was permanently abandoned thereafter. Dagan found no pottery samples which would suggest that the site had been a settlement during Iron Age II (the period to which the nearby burial cave is dated).

A Byzantine-period church complex was excavated at Khirbet Beit Lei in two short seasons (December 1983 and May 1986) by Joseph Patrich and Yoram Tsafrir of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.[29] Part of the financing for this operation was provided by a private Latter-day Saint group from the United States, organized by Skousen, who was very interested in seeing the excavation of the village ruins take place. The church building itself was 20.4 meters long and 13.9 meters wide and featured a spectacular mosaic floor with numerous geometric, floral, and animated artistic motifs. One of the depictions

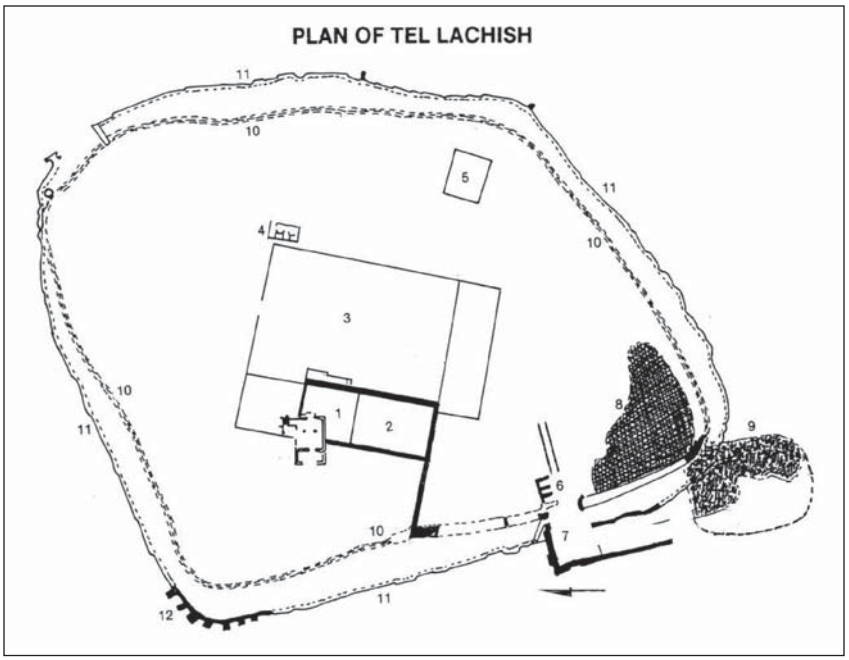

Fig. 9. Plan of excavations at Tel Lachish (east at top). Numbers 1–3 represent the Iron II-B (Level III) palace and parade yard. Number 9 represents the excavated portion of the Assyrian siege ramp from 701 BC. Compare fig. 8, where the four-sided enclosure may represent Lachish Level III, and the circle to the right the Assyrian siege ramp. Adapted from Ogden and Chadwick, *The Holy Land,* 252.

was of a sail-driven ship with a single fisherman aboard. Human and animal depictions in the mosaics were disfigured, probably by order of Muslim rulers during the eighth century, following the Islamic conquest of the region. Greek inscriptions were also among the depictions in the mosaic floor. The dedicatory inscription, found within a mosaic circle, reads, "Azizos and Cyriacos, with their blessing, dedicated the sanctuary." Another inscription states, "Epanagia dedicated the mosaic to the repose and memory of Aetius." Yet another reads, "The Lord Jesus Christ, give repost to your maidservant Theclon." A fourth, found near the baptismal font of the church, simply says, "Light of the righteous in all" (based on Proverbs 13:9), and a fifth reads, "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in" (based on Psalm 121:8). An olive press, a wine press, and a Byzantine burial cave were also uncovered near the church.[30]

A project to excavate additional parts of the village began in 2005 under the direction of Israeli archaeologists Oren Gutfeld and Yakov

Kalman.[31] The project is heavily funded by the private Beit Lehi group, organized and directed by Glenn Kimber. Volunteer labor is provided by young Latter-day Saints who periodically travel to Israel with Kimber. As of this writing (late 2008), no publication of any of the findings of this project has occurred in any recognized archaeological journal, including the Israel Antiquities Authority's *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* series.[32] In the past, amateur descriptions of some of the excavation activities and findings at the site have appeared on two now-discontinued Web sites sponsored by Kimber (http://www.beitlehi.com and http://www.beitlehi.org).[33] However, in November of 2008 a concise and professionally written report of the May and October 2008 excavation seasons at Khirbet Beit Lei written by Gutfeld and Michal Haber (an area supervisor at the excavation) appeared on another of Kimber's Web sites, http://www.beitlehifoundation.org. The report details subterranean finds from the Hellenistic period (third and second centuries BC) as well as the early Roman period (first century BC and first century AD) and a building that may have been in use in the early Roman period. The main architectural components of the village ruins date from the Mameluke period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries AD). Interestingly, Gutfeld and Haber suggest that the site came under ancient Jewish control shortly before 100 BC, during the time of John Hyrcanus's rule over Judea, suggesting that the site, like nearby Mareshah, had been controlled by Hellenistic Gentiles prior to that time. No finds whatsoever were mentioned as dating to the Iron Age periods.[34] The fact that no remains at the site date from the period of the kingdom of Judah (tenth to sixth centuries BC, Iron Age II), combined with the suggestion that the earliest Jewish control of the site only began around 100 BC (lasting only until the Roman war against Judea, which ended in AD 70), suggest that Jewish occupation of the site was relatively short lived.

In August of 2008, excavation codirector Yakov Kalman accompanied the author of this article on an extensive personal tour of the Khirbet Beit Lei excavation site, highlighting and explaining all of the project's finds. These included an impressive subterranean olive oil pressing installation and a large subterranean columbarium (a man-made dovecote), both dating to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The ruins visible above ground, both those excavated and those awaiting excavation, are dated to the Mameluke period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries AD), and no pottery nor other finds of any kind date earlier than the Hellenistic period (which is to say that there are no remains and no evidence whatsoever that the site was a settlement prior

to 332 BC). When asked specifically about pottery or other remains from the Iron Age II periods, Kalman answered that not even a single sherd of Iron Age II pottery had been recovered anywhere on the site. His description paralleled that of Gutfeld and Haber's 2008 report, as well as that of Dagan's earlier survey at the site: "The survey revealed that the ruin had been inhabited from the Hellenistic to the Mameluke period. No remains of an Iron Age settlement were found."[35]

Latter-day Saint Publications and Media about Khirbet Beit Lei

Having covered the brief history and results of archaeological exploration at the Jerusalem Cave and Khirbet Beit Lei, let us return to what has been said in publications and media produced over the years by Latter-day Saint parties interested in the site.

The very first treatment on the subject of Beit Lehi for a Latter-day Saint audience was prepared by Israeli anthropologist Joseph Ginat. Entitled "The Cave at Khirbet Beit Lei," it was delivered as a paper at a BYU symposium in October of 1971,[36] then published in the *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historical Archaeology* in April of 1972. In the essay, Ginat specifically identified the Beit Lei site as the place called Lehi in the story of Samson, noting the account in Judges 15. He insisted that "'Lei' and 'Lehi' are equivalent," asserting that "the word *lehi* (*lei*) means 'cheek' in both Hebrew and Arabic," and concluded that "the name Khirbet Beit Lei means 'Ruin of the House of Lehi.'"[37]

With regard to the cave, however, Ginat did not discuss its primary function as a burial site, glossing over the issue by saying only that the site's original excavator, Naveh, "concludes that this cave is a tomb." Instead, Ginat's focus was on the inscriptions and drawings found on the walls of the tomb's entry chamber. Citing the translations offered in 1970 by Cross, who identified one of inscriptions as "the citation of a lost prophecy,"[38] Ginat suggested they were "written there by someone fleeing before the Babylonian invaders who destroyed Judah and its capital city in 587 BC—perhaps even by a prophet or his secretary escaping from Jerusalem."[39] Ginat's conclusion was that "if we add together the inscriptions, the praying figure, and the ships, the sum of them all indeed seems significant, especially in this particular cave, located down from Jerusalem and in the fields of the ancient House of Lehi (Lei)."[40]

The obvious implication for Ginat's Latter-day Saint audience, that the Beit Lei area must be connected with the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi, his family, "the land of his inheritance" (1 Nephi 2:4),

and his sons hiding themselves in "the cavity of a rock" (1 Nephi 3:27) is noted by the editor of the *Newsletter* (Ross T. Christensen) in a paragraph following Ginat's essay.[41]

The account of the "treasure cave" at the "house of Lehi" and Ginat's discovery of the Arab sage who spoke of an ancient prophet at the site spread throughout the Latter-day Saint community during the early 1970s. Within a year of the publication of Ginat's essay, Latter-day Saint writers were spreading the word. In 1973, a two-page summary of issues surrounding the Lehi Cave and proposed Book of Mormon connections was included in LaMar C. Berrett's impressive and groundbreaking volume entitled *Discovering the Biblical World*. Under the heading "Jerusalem Cave (Lehi Cave), *Khirbet Beit Lei (Bayt Layy)*," Berrett clearly identified the cave as a burial site and summarized the analysis of its inscriptions from both Naveh and Cross. (The latter had used the spelling "Bayt Layy" in his 1970 article.)[42] Berrett noted Cross's "speculation that one inscription is the citation of a lost prophecy and that the companion inscriptions were written by a refugee fleeing the Chaldeans who conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem." Berrett also included Cross's specific suggestion "that we should suppress the temptation to consider the oracle and the petitions the work of a prophet or his scribe fleeing Jerusalem." But Berrett also linked the site to Book of Mormon references about Lehi fleeing Jerusalem, Lehi's sons fleeing from Laban, and his sons hiding in the cavity of a rock.[43]

In 1974, reports of Beit Lehi and the Lehi Cave found their way into the *Ensign*, the official magazine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[44] An article entitled "Archaeology Reveals Old Testament History" by Ross T. Christensen and Ruth R. Christensen, which surveyed a few biblically connected sites and finds in Israel, included a short description of the inscriptions and drawings from the tomb near Khirbet Beit Lei.[45] The Christensens also equated Beit Lei with the biblical place Lehi in the Samson story (see Judges 15:9), and mentioned the idea of the Beit Lei area having been the prophet Lehi's land of inheritance (see 1 Nephi 3:16) and the cave having been "the cavity of a rock" where Lehi's sons hid from Laban (1 Nephi 3:27).[46] In 1978, Vernon W. Mattson's small book *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Important Discoveries* included a short chapter on Khirbet Beit Lei, repeating the earlier propositions.[47]

By 1982, however, Berrett had reconsidered the wisdom of linking Beit Lei to the story of Lehi in the Book of Mormon. Having spent a considerable amount of time and experience teaching and traveling in

Israel, he prepared a paper entitled "The So-Called Lehi Cave" which pointed out weaknesses he felt existed in the claims of Beit Lehi advocates.[48] The seven-page, single-spaced paper circulated as a FARMS reprint and was the first genuine critique of the Lehi Cave theories. In it, Berrett reviewed the findings in the burial cave, including the skeletal remains and the drawings and inscriptions, citing the publications by both Naveh and Cross. Berrett then explored problems in linking the burial cave, its location, its drawings, and its inscriptions to the account of 1 Nephi. He reported his visits to the site in Israel and his conversations with two local Arab men (Mahmud Ali Hassan Giawi and Nimer Suleiman Bashir) who also believed that the ruins at Beit Lei were named for "an ancient prophet named 'Lei' [who] judged his people in that locality."[49] Though he seemed to accept the idea that the names Lei and Lehi were equivalent,[50] Berrett concluded that the totality of his research caused him to regard "any connection between this burial cave and the Book of Mormon [as] highly unlikely."[51]

A 1985 essay published by William A. Johnson in *Sunstone* also took issue with much of what was being spread around the Latter-day Saint community regarding Beit Lei. Entitled "Lessons Learned from Lehi's Cave," Johnson's amateur assessment briefly reviewed the discovery and findings connected with the Jerusalem Cave, as well as a variety of Mormon claims that were being made about the site by the mid-1980s.[52] He accepted without objection the notion that the Arabic *Lei* was the equivalent of the Hebrew *Lehi*, but also contrasted some of the arguments of Ginat and Berrett. Johnson concluded that "whether or not Lehi stayed in a cave in Khirbet Beit Lei is arguable. What is not arguable, however, is that many of the claims made about Lehi's Cave have been exaggerated."[53]

Lehi Cave advocates responded strongly and impressively in 1986 with the production and release of the previously mentioned thirty-minute video presentation entitled *The Lehi Cave*, which featured Skousen and Ginat and highlighted not only the burial cave but also the initial excavation finds at the Byzantine chapel. Thousands of copies of that video have been sold.[54] But just two years after the film's debut, a major scholarly figure in the story of the Jerusalem Cave responded.

In November of 1988 a number of letters about the Book of Mormon appeared in the "Queries and Comments" section of the widely circulated popular magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Though *BAR*, as it is commonly called, is not a Latter-day Saint publication, the discussion was specifically Book of Mormon–oriented. One of the

letters inquired about "Beit Lehi" and the burial cave inscriptions. The response by editor Hershel Shanks was informational and cautious. In dealing with the place-name, he noted, "The name of the site is not Beit Lehi . . . but Beit Lei, or, in its older Arabic form, Bayt Layy."[55] Shanks then added a response to the question prepared by Professor Cross himself, whose 1970 translation of the inscriptions had appeared in materials produced by Beit Lehi advocates. Cross was quite direct in his assessment of the name issue:

> As you know, the site of Khirbet Beit Lei (older Layy) was connected by Mormon authors with Biblical Leḥi (see Judges 15) and ultimately with the Mormon figure Lehi. The connection of the name Lei with Leḥi is based on a linguistic blunder, however. The Arabic Lei, classical Arabic Layy, is based on a root *lwy,* and means "bend, twist," etc. Hebrew Leḥi, on the other hand, is based on the Semitic root *lḥy,* meaning "jaw." And *lyy* and *lḥy* cannot be confused in Semitic. The ḥ is a strong laryngeal spirant in Semitic, somewhat like ch in German Buch or ch in Scottish loch. Neither Naveh nor I would for a moment support the equation *layy = leḥi,* any more than we would confuse (Robert E.) Lee with (John) Locke. I should add that when lecturing at Brigham Young University I discussed these issues in detail and made clear my name was not to be associated with such popular, unscholarly claims.[56]

Several years later this information had not seemed to affect the discussion of the site in Latter-day Saint circles. In 1996, Berrett revised his book *Discovering the World of the Bible* with a new coauthor, D. Kelly Ogden. The title of their concise summary dropped the term "Lehi Cave" and simply read "Jerusalem Cave, *Khirbet Beit Lei (Bayt Layy)*." The short report is decidedly more skeptical than the 1973 version, more along the lines of Berrett's 1982 FARMS report, and finds no evidence for any connection of the site with the story of Lehi in the Book of Mormon.[57] But no mention is made of the fact that Arabic *lei (layy)* is not the same as Hebrew *leḥi*. The same is true for a short article by Berrett in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* in 1999.[58] Like the 1982 FARMS report, the 1999 article was entitled "The So-Called Lehi Cave" and covered most of the same issues as its earlier namesake, concluding that there was little chance of any relationship between the Jerusalem Cave area and the Book of Mormon. But again, the difference between Hebrew *leḥi* and Arabic *lei* was not addressed.

Finally, in 2004 I published a chapter entitled "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance" in the book *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem,* in which I briefly explained why the "land of inheritance" cannot have been in the Beit Lei area.[59] Then, in a 2006 response entitled "An Archaeologist's View" that appeared in the

Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, I stated categorically that the term *lei* is not the same as the name Lehi and that the Beit Lei area could not have played any part in the 1 Nephi story. I gave further details in four endnotes to the article, including a citation of Cross's 1988 remarks in *Biblical Archaeology Review* about the dissimilarity of the Arabic *lei* and Hebrew *leḥi*.[60] I noted there:

> Additionally, we can say with virtual certainty that certain areas in Israel, often presented to Latter-day Saint tourists as having been associated with Lehi and his family, were not connected with them at all. For example, the so-called *Beit Lei* area, located in the Judean hills about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem, cannot have been an area where Lehi owned land or lived. The Arabic term *lei* is not to be confused with the Hebrew name *Lehi*. *Beit Lei* is an Arabic toponym pronounced "bait lay." But in Hebrew the site is known as *Beyt Loya*, and neither place-name is equivalent to the Hebrew name *Lehi*. Students of the Book of Mormon should be wary of claims about a so-called Lehi Cave or an alleged City of Lehi or Beit Lehi in the hills of Judah. These claims are entirely spurious.[61]

Questions and Answers: An Archaeologist's Evaluation

The foregoing review of all pertinent facts and literature on the Jerusalem Cave and Khirbet Beit Lei, scholarly and otherwise, has been a lengthy but necessary exercise on the way to deal with the several questions that must be asked about the Lehi Cave and Beit Lehi claims. Finally, we are now in a position to both address and answer those questions:

Question 1: Is the term *Beit Lehi* a correct or legitimate translation or rendering of the Arabic place-name *Beit Lei*?

Answer: No. As previously explained, the Arabic term *lei* (pronounced "lay") means "twisting" or "bending," and it is not the same as the Hebrew term *leḥi* (לֹחִי, pronounced "lĕkhi") which means "jaw" or "cheek." This was verified not only in the 1988 assessment of Cross, but also in 2008 by three Arabic language scholars, all professors at BYU.[62] The original 1971 equation of *lei* with *lehi* by Ginat was, to use the description of Cross, a "linguistic blunder." Its perpetuation by so many others for nearly four decades now has been an even bigger blunder.

Question 2: Even though the Arabic *lei* is not the same as the Hebrew *lehi*, could the area nonetheless have been the place of Lehi or the place Ramath-lehi mentioned in the story of Samson? (see Judges 15:9–19).

Answer: No. Samson's Lehi was most likely located in the hills surrounding the Sorek Valley as it runs east of Beit Shemesh. Almost all of the action in the story of Samson prior to his battle at Lehi had occurred in the Sorek Valley area, some twenty kilometers (by air) north of Khirbet Beit Lei. Samson's activities took place between Timnah (Timnath in Judges 14:1) at the west end of the Sorek Valley, and the Zorah/Eshtaol area near Beit Shemesh ("the camp of Dan" in Judges 13:25) further east in the Sorek Valley. The place called Etam, where Samson was located at the time the Philistines "spread themselves in Lehi" (Judges 15:8–9), is located by almost all historical geographers at Khirbet el-Khokh in the Judean hills near Bethlehem.[63] Since Etam and Lehi must have been in reasonable proximity to each other in the context of the account in Judges 15, this means that the site of Lehi cannot have been as far south as Khirbet Beit Lei. It would have made no sense for Philistines to come to the Beit Lei area if they wished to challenge the men of Judah near Samson's location at Etam. No Bible atlas in print places the Lehi of Judges 15 anywhere near Khirbet Beit Lei, and no historical geographer I know would do so either. The Beit Lei area simply cannot have been the place Lehi in the Samson story.

Question 3: Can an old well near Khirbet Beit Lei be the place called En-hakkore (see Judges 15:19), which the Samson story places at Lehi?[64]

Answer: No. Since Beit Lei cannot have been Samson's Lehi, the well near Beit Lei cannot have been involved in the story. Furthermore, the term *En-hakkore* means "the spring of him who calls" (Hebrew *en* or *ein* means "spring," not "well"). The well near Beit Lei, which probably dates no earlier than the Roman period in any event, cannot properly be characterized as a spring.

Question 4: Was there any ancient Israelite or Jewish settlement at Khirbet Beit Lei during the time of biblical Samson (ca. 1100 BC; Iron Age I) or during the time of the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi (ca. 600 BC; Iron Age II)?

Answer: No. The archaeological survey of Khirbet Beit Lei carried out by Yehuda Dagan in the 1970s revealed no evidence of any Iron Age I or Iron Age II settlement at the site. This was confirmed by the archaeological excavations of Joseph Patrich and Yoram Tsafrir in the 1980s and by the current excavations being carried out by Oren Gutfeld and Yakov Kalman. Not even a single sherd of Iron Age I or II pottery has been found at Khirbet Beit Lei, nor any architectural component from those periods. There was no city, nor town, nor village,

nor private estate at Khirbet Beit Lei during the time of Samson or of the prophet Lehi.

Question 5: So could there have been any kind of settlement at Khirbet Beit Lei around 600 BC that could be called a city of Lehi or Beit Lehi, or was there any community at the site around 600 BC in which Lehi might have prophesied or served as a judge?

Answer: No city or town; no community at all. No one lived at the site in 600 BC.

Question 6: Although there was no Iron Age II architecture, pottery, or remains of any kind and no sign of human habitation prior to 300 BC, is there a chance that Khirbet Beit Lei could have been the "land of . . . inheritance" (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:16, 22) of Lehi and his sons?

Answer: It is extremely unlikely. In addition to the fact that no sign of Iron Age II occupation exists at the site, the Assyrian attack on Judah in 701 BC with its accompanying destruction and deportation of every community outside Jerusalem, combined with the (Assyrian-mandated) Philistine occupation of the Judean Shephelah (low hills) during most of the seventh century BC, simply makes any case for Lehi having owned land anywhere in Judah outside Jerusalem quite weak. As noted in a previous study, the location of Lehi's land of inheritance was probably in the ancient tribal region of western Manasseh (that is to say, in Manasseh on the west side of the Jordan River).[65]

Question 7: When was the village at Khirbet Beit Lei an active community?

Answer: All of the archaeologists above affirm that the site was first utilized as an oil-pressing complex during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods (ca. 300 BC to AD 70). Underground oil presses and dovecotes have been excavated at the site by Gutfeld and Kalman. Later, during the Byzantine period (fourth to sixth centuries AD), the site was used as a Christian monastic complex with an elaborately decorated chapel, which was excavated by Patrich and Tsafrir. The site seems to have been abandoned thereafter until it was resettled and built up as an Arab village during the Mameluke period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries AD). The ruins of houses and public buildings from this era have been cleared by Gutfeld and Kalman; pottery remains from the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Mameluke periods have been recovered from all over the site.

Question 8: Was Khirbet Beit Lei ever a Jewish site?

Answer: Possibly. According to Gutfeld, the site seems to have been taken over by Jewish forces during the time of John Hyrcanus, around 100 BC. The site may have been used by Jews of Judea from

that time until the Roman war against Judea, which culminated in AD 70. However, there would be no connection between that Jewish complex and the Book of Mormon story.

Question 9: What about the local Arab legend that the site was named after a man called Nebi Lei?

Answer: In Arabic, the term *Nebi Lei* means "the prophet Layy." But since *Lei* (properly *Layy*) is not the same as the Hebrew term *leḥi* (properly pronounced "lěkhy") there is no way that the name *Nebi Lei* refers to the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi. Although Beit Lehi proponents have claimed that Nebi Lei was an ancient Israelite prophet, in the Arabic language interview aired in *The Lehi Cave* video, no mention was made of Nebi Lei being either an ancient prophet or an Israelite prophet. The name *Nebi Lei* most probably refers to a legend about a local Muslim saint who lived in the area around Idna, probably in the early Islamic period (ca. AD 640–1100), prior to the Crusades. The name *Lei* seems to have become associated with the village of Beit Lei only after the Crusader period, since the village itself dates only from the Mameluke period. Local Muslim saints were known by such titles as *nebi* in various places around the Middle East—the most prominent of these west of the Jordan River was Nebi Salah, also known as Sheikh Salah, for whom there was also a village named.[66]

Question 10: Was the tomb known as the Jerusalem Cave a treasure cave as some Beit Lehi sources have suggested?

Answer: No treasure was found in the cave, and no evidence was found that the cave had ever been the repository of any treasure, silver and gold or otherwise. A ring, an earring, and a clasp, all of bronze, were the only items found with the skeletal remains, and these were simple and inexpensive. There is no sense in which it could be claimed that archaeologists had found a treasure cave at the tomb site.

Question 11: Could the tomb known as the Jerusalem Cave have been a place where Jews from Jerusalem (Lehi's sons or otherwise) would have hidden themselves around 600 BC?

Answer: It's possible, but not very likely. The tomb's distance from Jerusalem, over thirty kilometers direct walking distance, would make it about a seven-hour walk. The fact that it was a tomb would also probably have hindered Jews from hiding inside it. By 600 BC the prohibitions in the law of Moses regarding corpses and burial sites were generally known among the Jewish population. These prohibited contact with human corpses, bones, and tombs. Those who merely touched a corpse, bone, or tomb, even for necessary activities involved with burial of the dead, were considered unclean for a seven-day period

(see Numbers 19:10–19). For persons who observed the law of Moses, such as Lehi and Nephi, the idea of hiding themselves (or even hiding treasure) inside a tomb seems highly unlikely.

Question 12: Is the tomb known as the Jerusalem Cave located in a wilderness area, as was "the cavity of a rock" in which Nephi and his brothers hid in the Book of Mormon narrative?

Answer: No. The Jerusalem cave is located southwest of Jerusalem in the Shephelah (low hills) of Judah, an area of rich soil and arable land that supported agriculture. The wilderness (Hebrew *midbar*) of Judah, in the geographical context of both the Bible and the Book of Mormon, was the desert area located to the east and southeast of Jerusalem. No native Judean would characterize the Jerusalem Cave as being in the wilderness.

Question 13: Could the tomb known as the Jerusalem Cave qualify in any sense as the cavity of a rock in which Nephi and his brothers hid?

Answer: No. The term "cavity of a rock" suggests a natural hollow or fissure, not an artificially carved burial cave such as the tomb in question. Indeed, the fact that Nephi's text does not even use the word *cave*, but rather the very specific term "cavity of a rock," is quite interesting. If we were to conjecture what ancient Hebrew term was behind the English translation of 1 Nephi 3:27, it would probably not be מערה (*me'arah*), which means "cave" (as in 1 Samuel 24:3), but סעיף סלע (*sif sela*), which means "cleft of a rock." In the story of Samson (Judges 15:8–10), the term *sif sela* is used in the phrase *sif sela etam*, which is oddly rendered as "top of the rock of Etam" in the King James Version of the Bible, but which is translated as "cleft of the rock of Etam" in more modern translations (the NKJV, the RSV, the NRSV, the ASV, and the NASV, to name a few).[67] A *sif* or cleft is a narrow, often deep cavity, and it is thus entirely plausible that *sif sela* was the Hebrew term behind the "cavity of a rock" in Nephi's account. In any case, the term "cavity" surely indicates a natural fissure, not a man-made burial cave such as the Jerusalem Cave.

Question 14: Could the sons of Lehi have hidden in the Jerusalem Cave after the death of Laban, as suggested by Ginat and reported by Skousen?

Answer: The account in 1 Nephi makes no mention whatsoever of Lehi's sons hiding in a cave, or hiding anywhere else, after the death of Laban. Indeed, the text indicates that following Laban's death, the sons of Lehi took their new companion Zoram and departed into the wilderness (the desert) to return to the camp of Lehi. They certainly did not travel through the fertile Shephelah area in which the Jerusalem

Cave tomb was located. In fact, in all of Lehi's and Nephi's reported travels, their trail was into and through the desert wildernesss, not the fertile hill country of Judah. There is no textual evidence in the Book of Mormon account which accords with Ginat's ideas.

Question 15: Could Lehi or his sons have written the inscriptions found on the walls of the entry chamber of the Jerusalem Cave?

Answer: Almost certainly not. Here is why: Of the four expert epigraphers who expressed opinions dating the Jerusalem Cave inscriptions, three (Naveh, LeMaire, and Zevit) have dated them to around 700 BC, specifically to the horizon of the 701 BC Assyrian attack on Judah. Zevit's analysis connecting one of the drawings (see fig. 8) to the Assyrian attack on Lachish is quite convincing. Only Cross dates the inscriptions to the 600 BC horizon (actually to a little later than 600 BC). Thus three of four experts believe the inscriptions and drawings to have been created a full century prior to the story of Lehi and his sons. If the majority scholarly opinion is at all correct, it is virtually certain that neither Lehi nor any of his sons had anything to do with these inscriptions and drawings.

Question 16: Were the inscriptions written by a prophet or the associate of a prophet?

Answer: Again, probably not. Even Cross, whom Beit Lehi advocates have often quoted to support their case (which Cross categorically repudiates), resists the idea that the inscriptions were the work of a prophet or his associate: "At all events we shall suppress the temptation to suggest that the oracle and the petitions may have been the work of a prophet or his amanuensis fleeing Jerusalem."[68]

Question 17: Does the presence of ship drawings in the Jerusalem Cave have any connection with the story of Nephi building a ship in the Book of Mormon?

Answer: Certainly not. First of all, the drawings are probably to be dated to the same period as the inscriptions, which three of the four expert epigraphers involved maintain was around 701 BC, far too early for the story of Nephi. But secondly, even if Cross's dating of 600 BC or later is accepted, the text of the Book of Mormon would not support the idea that Nephi or any of his family knew anything about their building of a ship while they were still in Judah or even while Lehi was encamped at the Valley of Lemuel. The text of 1 Nephi is very specific—Nephi learned of his shipbuilding assignment only after the party had arrived at the Bountiful shore (see 1 Nephi 17:5–8). And while both Nephi and his father Lehi understood early on that they would

eventually gain a "land of promise" (1 Nephi 4:14, 5:5), they seem to have been under the impression that they would arrive there simply by traveling through the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 5:22). Only later, after the journeys back to Jerusalem were behind them, did Nephi learn in his vision that the land of promise was across the sea (see 1 Nephi 13:12). But again, no hint of Nephi's shipbuilding involvement occurs until much later (see 1 Nephi 17:8). In the context of 1 Nephi, when the sons of Lehi confronted Laban, they were unaware of their family's future involvement with a ship. They would have had no motivation to draw ships in a cave.

Question 18: Is there any connection between the ship drawings in the Jerusalem Cave and the mosaic renditions of ships and fishermen found in the Byzantine church at Khirbet Beit Lei?

Answer: No. The ships depicted in the burial cave seem to be seagoing vessels, whereas the boats depicted in the mosaic floor of the Byzantine church are similar in form to ancient fishing vessels used at Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee). Additionally, the burial cave, though located only a few hundred yards from the church, would have been unknown to the Byzantine monks of the church complex. The tomb's entrance was completely covered over with naturally deposited soil and vegetation centuries prior to the Byzantine period. Neither the Hellenistic Gentiles nor the Roman-period Jews who raised doves and produced olive oil at the site would have been aware of the old Iron Age II tomb nearby. Like the Byzantine monks, the Arab villagers of the Mameluke period were unaware of that ancient Judean burial cave. Only in 1961, because of an Israeli road project, was the Jerusalem Cave again brought to light. The Byzantine Christians of the region had no knowledge of the tomb, its inscriptions, or its ship drawings.

Question 19: Even if there is no connection between the burial cave ship drawings and the mosaic renditions of fishing boats found in the Byzantine church at Khirbet Beit Lei, could the church mosaics still somehow be connected with the story of Nephi's shipbuilding?

Answer: No. The church was a Christian edifice dating to the fourth to seventh centuries AD, over a thousand years later than the 1 Nephi story. No Iron Age II community, Jewish or otherwise, had existed at the site in the 600 BC time period of 1 Nephi. The Greek language mosaic inscriptions of the church make no mention of any prophet, nor person named Lehi, nor person named Lei. (The Arabic name *Lei* most likely became connected with the site only following the Byzantine period.) Nothing in the art or inscriptions of the church hints at any connection with ancient Judah, ancient Jews, or any event,

person, or motif mentioned in the account of 1 Nephi. The suggestion that the church somehow commemorates the prophet Lehi or anything connected with him is fanciful and unsupported. Nothing about the ruins of the Byzantine church suggests that it was built to commemorate anything in the Old Testament period or any event or person connected with the Book of Mormon.

Question 20: What should we think of the archaeological excavations that are taking place at Khirbet Beit Lei?

Answer: All of the archaeological activities that have taken place at the site to date have been professional and legitimate, carried out by qualified and licensed Israeli archaeologists. Naveh's excavation of the Jerusalem Cave in 1961, Patrich's and Tsafrir's excavation of the Byzantine chapel in the 1980s, and Gutfeld's and Kalman's current excavation of the Arab village and the Hellenistic/Roman period oil presses and dovecotes have all been carried out with skill and according to accepted archaeological methodology of their day. The fact that Beit Lehi advocates have provided funding and volunteer labor for the current excavation project has not unduly affected the findings made by the project nor the interpretation of the findings by the Israeli excavators. A concern I have is that Gutfeld has begun using the term *Beit Lehi* when speaking of Khirbet Beit Lei (at least for Latter-day Saint audiences).[69] If he is doing this to pander to the sponsors who provide financing and labor for his excavations, it is understandable, albeit inaccurate. If he is doing so because he is convinced that the Beit Lei area really is connected to the story of Samson's Lehi, then a serious study and reconsideration of the biblical text and the systematic historical geography of the Samson story is warranted on his part. That said, however, Gutfeld is a talented and respected archaeologist.

Conclusion

There is no such thing as a Lehi Cave or Beit Lehi. These terms are the unfortunate product of linguistic misinformation, faulty scriptural interpretation, and too-fertile imagination. They are not supported by the finds of any archaeological excavation. It is stunning to me that the original linguistic blunder identifying Khirbet Beit Lei as Samson's Lehi in 1971 has gone too long unchallenged in Latter-day Saint circles. On the other hand, the flawed use of both Bible and Book of Mormon passages to connect the prophet Lehi and his sons to both Khirbet Beit Lei and the Jerusalem Cave has not gone unchallenged. But the warnings of the challengers were not widely spread among the Latter-day Saint community and were ignored by those of too-fertile imagination.

The Jerusalem Cave will remain a site of interest to students of archaeology, historical geography, and the scriptures, since its inscriptions and drawings seem connected to that drama described in Isaiah 36–37 and 2 Kings 18–19, namely the Assyrian attack on Judah in 701 BC, and the subsequent salvation of Jerusalem. That the inscriptions in the burial cave contain the earliest written occurrence of the Hebrew place name Jerusalem (*Yerushalem*) is a fact of great importance. The oracles in the Jerusalem Cave seem to concord with the prophecies spoken by the prophet Isaiah concerning the kingdom of Judah and its capital.

The ruins at Khirbet Beit Lei, from its Hellenistic and Roman agricultural installations to its Byzantine chapel to its medieval Arab village, are of significant interest in understanding the overall history and archaeology of the land of Israel. The excavations now taking place at Khirbet Beit Lei are a worthy effort and need not be connected with the Old Testament or the Book of Mormon in order to be considered a significant archaeological project. If Latter-day Saint volunteers and donors wish to devote a portion of their time and treasure to forward those excavations, the results will be rewarding regardless of the fact that they are not connected with the Book of Mormon account. RE

Notes

1. The Arabic place name *Beit Lei* (بيت ليّ)—pronounced "bait lay"—first appeared in published form in two places in *The Survey of Western Palestine,* published by the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) during the nineteenth century. The Arabic spelling above occurs in Conder and Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Arabic and English Name Lists,* transliterated by E. H. Palmer (1881), 365, with the note that the proper name means "twisting," alongside the English spelling "Beit Leyi," with the y-i syllable representing the doubled Arabic letter ya (y). The name is translated "The house of Leyi." The same English spelling occurs in Conder and Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography, and Archaeology,* vol. 3, *Judaea* (1883), 274, noting the site's features as "foundations, ruined walls, and caves and cisterns."

2. W. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon,* vol. 1, *First Nephi–Jacob 7* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Publishing, 1971–74, 1995), 42.

3. Quote from beitlehi.org website, http://www.beitlehi.org/about-beit-lehi (accessed August 20, 2008). The Book of Mormon passage actually reads "cavity of a rock" (see 1 Nephi 3:27) rather than the website's version, "cavity in a rock." See note 33 below for more information on this website.

4. Quote citing "treasure cave" from beitlehi.org website, http://www.beitlehi.org/about-beit-lehi (accessed August 20, 2008).

5. Quote from beitlehi.org, http://www.beitlehi.org/about-beit-lehi (accessed August 20, 2008).

6. Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon,* 43.

7. *The Lehi Cave,* "Visit Israel with Dr. W. Cleon Skousen" series (Ogden, UT: JS Publishing, Living Scriptures, VHS 1986, DVD 2002).

8. See note 1 above.

9. Joseph Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," *Israel Exploration Journal* 13, no. 2 (1963): 84; Hebrew and English spelling in context.

10. Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," 86.

11. Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," 86.

12. Frank Moore Cross Jr., "The Cave Inscriptions from Khirbet Beit Lei," in *Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck: Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century,* ed. James A. Sanders (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 301.

13. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 301.

14. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 302.

15. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 302.

16. Andre Lemaire, "Prières en temps de crise: les inscriptions de Khirbet Beit Lei," *Revue Biblique* 83 (1976): 558–60; English translation from Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 419.

17. Lemaire, "Prières en temps de crise," 558–60; translation from Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 419.

18. Lemaire, "Prières en temps de crise," 561; translation from Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 430.

19. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 424.

20. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 426.

21. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 429–30.

22. Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," 92.

23. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 303–4.

24. Lemaire, "Prières en temps de crise," 563–65.

25. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 420 ff.

26. Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," 76n5.

27. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 410.

28. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel,* 410. Ancient maps, such as the Medeba Map of Byzantine period Palestine, are also generally east oriented, and even though such maps are from periods later than the Iron Age, they also reflect the east-as-forward idiom of the biblical literature.

29. Initial reports of the finds made by Patrich and Tsafrir at Khirbet Beit Lei in 1983 and 1986 were published in official publications of the Israel Antiquities Authority: *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 4 (1985): 11–14 (for the 1983 finds), and *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 6 (1987–88): 3–6 (for the 1986 finds).

30. For complete details of finds from the Khirbet Beit Lei village remains, including the Greek mosaic inscriptions, see the report by Joseph Patrich and Yoram Tsafrir in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land,* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Carta/Israel Exploration Society/Simon and Schuster, 1993), 210–14.

31. Oren Gutfeld is usually referred to as the director of the excavation, and Yakov Kalman as codirector. According to Kalman, the names of both men appear on the excavation license issued by the Israel Antiquities Authority, which officially designates both men as excavators of the site.

32. A search of *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* (2005 through 2008), the Israel Antiquities Authority publication (now on the Internet), for immediate preliminary reporting of archaeological excavation activity in Israel did not offer even a summary paragraph on excavation activities at Khirbet Beit Lei from 2005 through 2008.

33. Beitlehi.com was operating in 2006 and 2007 but was out of commission when checked in 2008. Beitlehi.org was operating in August and September of 2008, but by October of 2008 was no longer in service. (However, in October of 2008, beitlehifoundation.org had begun to operate.)

34. Oren Gutfeld and Michal Haber, "Report—2008 Excavation Season: Beit Lehi (Horbat Beit Loya)—The 2008 Seasons," http://beitlehifoundation.org/?page_id=507(accessed November 24, 2008).

35. Patrich and Tsafrir, *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations,* 1: 211.

36. The paper was read at the Twenty-First Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures, held at Brigham Young University on October 16, 1971.

37. Joseph Ginat, "The Cave at Khirbet Beit Lei," in *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* no. 129 (April 1972), 3. It should be noted that Professor Ginat is not recognized as an archaeologist nor an expert in ancient Hebrew or other ancient languages, in historical geography, or in the comparison of Arabic place-names to ancient place-names.

38. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 304.

39. Ginat, "Cave at Khirbet Beit Lei," 3.

40. Ginat, "Cave at Khirbet Beit Lei," 4.

41. Ginat, "Cave at Khirbet Beit Lei," 5, "editor's notes" following bibliography.

42. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 299.

43. LaMar C. Berrett, *Discovering the World of the Bible* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 395–96.

44. Ross T. Christensen and Ruth R. Christensen, "Archaeology Reveals Old Testament History: Digging for the Truth," *Ensign,* February 1974, 66.

45. The acknowledgment for the article describes Ross T. Christensen as a professor of archaeology at Brigham Young University and his wife Ruth R. Christensen as a graduate student in the same field. However, the two were neither specialists nor experts in the archaeology of the land of Israel, nor did they excavate or work there.

46. The Christensens made a fundamental error in saying that Lehi's sons "on their way . . . back to their encampment beside the Red Sea hid for a time in 'the cavity of a rock' (1 Nephi 3:27)" ("Archaeology Reveals Old Testament History," 66). It was not on their return to the Red Sea that Nephi and his brothers secreted themselves in this manner; rather it was after having fled from Laban's house and Jerusalem into the wilderness, where they hid for a time before returning to Jerusalem, where Nephi slew Laban and obtained the plates of brass. Only then did Lehi's sons return to the Red Sea and the camp of Lehi (see 1 Nephi 3:24–4:38).

47. Vernon W. Mattson Jr., *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Important Discoveries* (Brandon, FL: Buried Records, 1978), 57–61.

48. Lamar C. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," unpublished paper reproduced as a FARMS reprint (BER-82) in 1982, 7.

49. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," 3.

50. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," 4.

51. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," 7.

52. William A. Johnson, "Lessons Learned from Lehi's Cave," *Sunstone*, July 1985, 27–30. The author, an amateur in terms of ancient studies and archaeology, was identified as president of a consulting firm specializing in the oil and gas industry, holding a PhD in economics from Harvard University.

53. Johnson, "Lessons Learned from Lehi's Cave," 30.

54. See note 7 above.

55.Hershel Shanks, ed., in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, November/December 1988, 19.

56. Frank Moore Cross, quoted by Shanks in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, November/December 1988, 19.

57. LaMar C. Berrett and D. Kelly Ogden, *Discovering the World of the Bible* (Provo, UT: Grandin Book, 1996), 178–79.

58. LaMar C. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 64–66.

59. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem,* ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 105, 110.

60. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "An Archaeologist's View," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 68–76, notes on 122–23.

61. Chadwick, "An Archaeologist's View," 68.

62. Author's private correspondence with three experts in Arabic language at Brigham Young University: Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies (September 8, 2008); S. Dilworth Parkinson, professor of Arabic (September 10, 2008); and Brian M. Hauglid, professor of ancient scripture (September 10, 2008). All confirmed the reading of Beit Lei offered by Frank Moore Cross and affirmed that the term *lei* means "twisting" or "bending" and is not linguistically equivalent in any way to the Hebrew term *leḥi.*

63. The site of Etam is generally identified with *Khirbet el-Khokh,* just southwest of Bethlehem in the hills of Judea. See *Student Map Manual: Historical Geography of the Bible Lands* (Jerusalem: Pictoral Archive, 1979), section 6–4 (map of Samson story) and section 15-2 #339 (index of main names). The "top of the rock of Etam" (Judges 15:8) is better translated "cleft of the rock of Etam" (from סעיף סלע עיטם—Hebrew *sif sela etam*), and was probably a natural cave in the hills just west of the community of Etam.

64. The suggestion that the old well near Khirbet Beit Lei should be regarded as En-hakkore was made at beitlehifoundation.org, under the heading "Name History"; http://www.beitlehifoundation.org/?page_id=54, accessed November 24, 2008.

65. See the discussion by Chadwick in "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem,* 87–113, especially 105.

66. The traditional tomb of Nebi Salah, also known as Sheikh Salah, is located near Saint Katherine's Monastery in the southern Sinai peninsula. (The town of Nebi Salah is located northwest of Jerusalem, west of Ramallah.)

67. For the translation of סעיף סלע עיתם (*sif sela etam*) as "cleft of the rock of Etam," see Judges 15:8–10 in the NKJV (New King James Version), in the RSV (Revised Standard Version), in the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), in the ASV (American Standard Version), and in the NASV (New American Standard Version).

68. Cross, "Cave Inscriptions," 304.

69. Gutfeld used the term *Beit Lehi* in "Report—2008 Excavation Season" which appeared at beitlehifoundation.org (see note 34). He also used the term "Beit Lehi" in his recorded lecture to a Latter-day Saint audience in September 2007—the video recording of that lecture appeared on beitlehi.org until September of 2008.