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The Elders at Jerusalem in the Days of Lehi

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Source: *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*

Published: Salt Lake City; Cornerstone Publishing, 1999 (1st Edition)

Page(s): 59–75

Chapter 9

THE ELDERS AT JERUSALEM IN THE DAYS OF LEHI

And he spake unto me concerning the elders of the Jews, he knowing that his master, Laban, had been out by night among them. (1 Nephi 4:22)

The Book of Mormon owes its existence to a chain of historical events that began when the prophet Lehi was compelled to leave Jerusalem in the early part of the sixth century B.C. and establish a colony in the New World. Lehi's life was sought by "those at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 1:19-20; 17:44). Only one of these Jerusalemites, a man named Laban, is named in the Nephite record. He possessed a set of brass plates containing the scriptures and genealogical records that the Lord wanted Lehi to bring with him on his journey. Lehi sent his sons back to Jerusalem to retrieve the records (1 Nephi 3:1-9).

Laban was not just unwilling to part with the plates; he actively sought to slay Lehi's sons and stole the precious metals with which they hoped to purchase the plates (1 Nephi 3:10-14, 22-26). The young men fled and sought refuge in a cave (1 Nephi 3:27), where they discussed their options. Nephi, leader of the expedition, determined that the Lord would help them (1 Nephi 4:1-4). Leaving his brothers outside the walls of the city, he "crept towards the house of Laban" (1 Nephi 4:5-6). As he approached, he found Laban fallen to the ground and, following the direction of the Spirit, slew him with his own sword, then donned his armor (1 Nephi 4:7-19). He then went to retrieve the plates and encountered Laban's servant, who, in the dark, took him for his master (1 Nephi 4:20-21).

And he spake unto me concerning the elders of the

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Jews, he knowing that his master, Laban, had been out by night among them. And I spake unto him as if it had been Laban. And I also spake unto him that I should carry the engravings, which were upon the plates of brass, to my elder brethren, who were without the walls. And I also bade him that he should follow me. And he, supposing that I spake of the brethren of the church, and that I was truly that Laban whom I had slain, wherefore he did follow me. And he spake unto me many times concerning the elders of the Jews, as I went forth unto my brethren, who were without the walls. (1 Nephi 4:22-27)

From this account, it seems that Laban was one of “the elders of the Jews,” who seem to be the same as “the brethren of the church.” The English word “church” means “assembly” or “congregation.” Psalm 107:32 speaks of the “assembly of the elders,” paralleled in the same passage by the term “congregation of the people.” Other Old Testament passages speak of “the elders of the congregation” (Leviticus 4:15; Judges 21:16) and the duty of the elders to address the assembly of the people (Jeremiah 26:17; Joel 1:14; 2:16).¹ In order to understand the role the elders played in Lehi’s day, we must investigate the institution of the office of elder.

THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL

The Hebrew term rendered “elder” in English is *zāqēn*, deriving from the word for “beard” (*zāqān*), suggesting that one could not attain that rank until able to grow a beard. The first use of the term “elders” for Israelite officers appears in the days of

¹ Different Hebrew words are used in these passages, but all of them mean “assembly” or “congregation.” For modern assemblies of elders, see D&C 108:4.

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Moses. Sent back by God to lead his people out of Egypt, Moses went first to the elders and thereafter worked closely with them (Exodus 3:16-18; 4:29; 12:21; 17:5-6; 19:7; Numbers 16:25; Deuteronomy 27:1).

Through Moses, the Lord established the duties of the elders, some of them ritual in nature. The elders, along with the priests, were to bring animals for sacrifices (Exodus 18:12; Leviticus 9:1-6). When the people sinned through ignorance, it was ordained that the elders should lay their hands on the bullock to be sacrificed as a sin offering (Leviticus 4:13-15). When the Lord placed the Israelites under covenant, he commanded that “your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers” assemble with the rest of the people (Deuteronomy 29:10; 31:28). The elders joined Moses in commanding the people to keep the law God had given them. Later, Moses delivered the law “unto the priests the sons of Levi . . . and unto all the elders of Israel,” and commanded them that they should assemble the people once in seven years at the feast of tabernacles to rehearse to them the law (Deuteronomy 31:9-12).

The Lord commanded Moses to select from the body of elders seventy who were already known “to be the elders of the people, and officers over them,” to assist him in the government of the people (Numbers 11:16-17). The Lord gave his Spirit to these men (Numbers 11:24-30) and they were allowed to accompany Moses and the priests to meet with the Lord atop the mountain where the law had been given (Exodus 24:1, 9-11).

Moses’ successor, Joshua, also worked through the elders to govern the people (Joshua 7:6; 8:10). Following instructions from Moses (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:1-26), Joshua assembled “all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges” and placed them under covenant to obey the law of the Lord (Joshua 8:33). Near the end of his life, he twice “called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers” and gave them instructions to observe the law of God (Joshua 24:1; see also Joshua 23:2). Thereafter, it was “the elders that outlived Joshua”

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who governed the people (Joshua 24:31; Judges 2:7). It was these elders who selected military leaders in time of war (Judges 11:5-6, 11; 1 Samuel 4:3) and who made other decisions for the people (Judges 21:16).

While the elders occasionally assembled to determine matters of national concern, their normal activities took place within their own cities. Indeed, throughout Israelite history, it was the elders who governed the cities (1 Samuel 11:3; 16:4; Ezra 10:14).

The elders typically performed their duties at the city gate (Proverbs 31:23; Lamentations 5:14),² where they passed judgment on sinners (Deuteronomy 21:19-21; 22:13-21), judged various legal matters (Deuteronomy 25:7-9), and witnessed contracts (Ruth 4:1-11). When a murderer could not be identified, the elders of the city closest to the site of the crime were to take an oath and to perform a ceremony that absolved their people of responsibility (Deuteronomy 21:2-9).

The elders living in one of the six designated "cities of refuge" had additional responsibilities. They had to sit in the gate and pass judgment on refugees accused of killing another person. If the killing was accidental, they gave asylum (Joshua 20:4-5), but they delivered murderers up for punishment (Deuteronomy 19:11-12).

ELDERS AND KINGS

At the end of the second millennium B.C., the elders of Israel came to the prophet Samuel to ask that he select a king to rule the people (1 Samuel 8:4). Samuel reluctantly agreed and, guided by the Lord, anointed Saul (1 Samuel 9). The new king knew that he owed his position to the elders and, when confronted

² The earliest Biblical references to legal discussions in the gate, albeit referring to Canaanite cities, appear in Genesis 23:10, 18; 34:20, 24.

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by Samuel with wrongdoing, asked that the prophet not dishonor him before the elders of the people (1 Samuel 15:30-31).

David, anointed by Samuel as Saul's successor (1 Samuel 16), carried favor with "the elders of Judah" by sending them spoil taken in battle (1 Samuel 30:26). Following the death of Saul, David was accepted by the "men of Judah" (probably the elders) as king (2 Samuel 2:4). Seven years later, Saul's uncle, Abner, persuaded the elders of Israel to make David king over the northern tribes as well (2 Samuel 3:17). "So all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron; and king David made a league with them in Hebron before the Lord: and they anointed David king over Israel" (2 Samuel 5:3; see also 1 Chronicles 11:3).

Royal dependence on the elders is suggested by the fact that Absalom, when he revolted against his father David, sought the support of the elders (2 Samuel 17:4). After a fierce civil war in which Absalom was killed, David was restored to kingship, but was disappointed that the elders of his own tribe were the last to accept him (2 Samuel 19:11-12).

Subsequent kings are also known to have worked through the city elders (1 Kings 21:8, 11; 2 Kings 10:1, 5), even consulting the elders about foreign affairs (1 Kings 20:7-8). The elders joined with the king in religious festivals and prayers, including covenant ceremonies (1 Kings 8:1-3; 2 Kings 23:1; 1 Chronicles 15:25; 2 Chronicles 5:4; Joel 1:14; 2:16). When troubles befell the people, the elders dressed in sackcloth and joined the king in mourning (1 Chronicles 21:16; Isaiah 37:2; Lamentations 2:10).

During the monarchy, the elders continued to address assemblies of the people (Jeremiah 16:17). When the first group of Jews was taken captive to Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah addressed a letter to its elders, priest, and prophets (Jeremiah 29:1). Upon returning from captivity, the elders became heavily involved in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 5:5, 9; 6:7-8, 14; 10:8).

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LABAN AND THE ELDERS

Jerusalem was a royal city and, consequently, its elders were public officials in the service of the king. The fact that Laban had been meeting with the “elders of the Jews” on the night Nephi found him drunk in the street (1 Nephi 4:22) suggests that he was a member of the ruling body at Jerusalem, one of its chief elders. Hugh Nibley³ has noted evidence that Laban was, in fact, a military leader as well. Nephi found him dressed in his military armor, with a beautiful sheathed sword on his person (1 Nephi 4:8-9, 19-21). He evidently commanded a group of fifty men—perhaps a personal guard—plus tens of thousands of others (1 Nephi 3:31-4:1).

Some Bible passages connect the elders with the “princes” (Judges 8:14; Lamentations 5:12; Ezra 10:8). The Hebrew term behind “princes” is *sārīm*, which refers to government officials, whether of royal ancestry or not (usually not). Though usually translated *prince(s)* in the King James Bible,⁴ it is sometimes rendered *officer(s)* (1 Kings 9:23), *chief(s)*,⁵ *governor(s)*,⁶ *captain(s)*,⁷

³ Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1988), 97-98.

⁴ 1 Samuel 18:30; 29:3-4, 9; 2 Samuel 3:38; 10:3; 1 Kings 20:14-15, 17, 19; 1 Chronicles 19:3; 23:2; 27:22; 2 Chronicles 12:6; 21:9; 22:8; 24:17, 23; 32:3, 31; Ezra 7:28; 8:20; Nehemiah 9:34; Psalms 105:22; 119:23, 161; 148:11; Proverbs 8:16; 28:2; Isaiah 1:23; 3:4; 9:6; 10:8; 19:11, 13; 23:8; 30:4; 31:9; 43:28; 49:7; Jeremiah 2:26; 8:1; 24:1, 8; 25:18-19; 26:10-12, 16, 21; 29:2; 32:32; 34:19, 21; 36:21; 37:15; 38:4, 17-18, 22; 39:3, 13; 50:35; 51:57, 59; 52:10; Lamentations 1:6; 5:12; Ezekiel 11:1; 17:12; 22:27; Daniel 1:7, 9-11, 18; 8:11, 25; 9:6; 10:20-21; 11:5; Hosea 3:4; 5:10; 7:3, 5, 16; 8:10; 9:15; Amos 2:3; Zephaniah 3:3.

⁵ 1 Kings 14:27; 1 Chronicles 15:22; 35:9; 36:14; Ezra 8:29; 10:5; “chief . . . officers” in 2 Chronicles 8:10 and “principal” in Jeremiah 52:25.

⁶ 1 Kings 22:26; 2 Kings 23:8; 1 Chronicles 24:5; 2 Chronicles 18:25; 34:8.

⁷ 1 Samuel 12:9; 14:50; 17:55; 18:13; 22:7; 26:5; 2 Samuel 2:8; 4:2; 10:16, 18; 18:1; 19:13; 24:2, 4; 1 Kings 1:19; 2:5, 32; 11:15, 21, 24; 15:20; 16:9, 16; 22:31-33; 2 Kings 1:9-11, 13-14; 4:13; 5:1; 8:21; 9:5; 11:4, 9, 15, 19; 25:18, 20,

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or *ruler(s)*.⁸ Thus, when we read in Ezra 10:14 of the “rulers of all the congregation . . . and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof,” we are to understand the elders to be rulers of the various cities, while the “rulers” or *sārīm* are general officers over the nation. The “rulers” (*sārīm*) are also listed with the elders in 2 Kings 10:1. Another passage (1 Chronicles 15:25) mentions “the elders of Israel, and the captains (*sārīm*) over thousands,” suggesting that some of the *sārīm* were military leaders.

Hugh Nibley identified the “elders” with whom Laban met with the *sārīm* of the Bible who opposed the work of the prophet Jeremiah, Lehi’s contemporary.⁹ Laban’s unwillingness to let Lehi’s sons have the records on the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:3:11-13, 22-25) reminds one of the “princes” of Judah who wanted to keep Jeremiah’s writings from the people (Jeremiah 36:21-23). When Nephi, dressed in Laban’s armor and speaking in his voice (perhaps easier to imitate because Laban had been drunk), met Zoram, the steward of Laban’s treasury, he readily convinced him to bring the precious plates to his “elder brethren, who were without the walls” (1 Nephi 4:24). This meant going to one of the city gates, which is where the elders typically met, and explains why Zoram did not question the decision to go there.

23; 1 Chronicles 19:16, 18; 27:3, 5; 2 Chronicles 16:4; 17:14; 18:30-32; 23:1, 14, 20; 32:6; 33:11, 14; Nehemiah 2:9; Isaiah 3:3; Jeremiah 40:7, 13; 41:11, 13, 16; 42:1, 8; 43:4-5.

⁸ 2 Kings 10:11; Chronicles 21:2; 27:31; 2 Chronicles 29:20; Nehemiah 3:9, 12, 14-19; 7:2; 11:1; 12:32-32). In 1 Chronicles 28:1, the same Hebrew word, is translated “princes,” “captains,” and “stewards,” with a different Hebrew word being rendered “officers.” In 1 Chronicles 29:6, it is variously rendered “chief(s),” “princes,” “captains,” and “rulers.”

⁹ Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, 7-9, 98-99; *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (3rd ed., Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1988), 112-13.

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A CONSPIRACY OF THE PRINCES

The fact that Laban was meeting with the elders by night, in full dress armor (1 Nephi 4:19-22, 27) suggested to Nibley that this group may have been involved in a conspiracy of some sort.¹⁰ Such a conspiracy may have been like the “secret combinations” among the Nephites, whose purpose was to “get gain” and political power by means of murder (Helaman 7:4; Mormon 8:40-41; Ether 8:13-23; 11:15; cf. Moses 5:31).

Thirty years before the birth of Christ, the Nephite secret society was responsible for the attempted assassination of one chief judge (Helaman 2:7-8) and the murder of two chief judges in succession (Helaman 6:16-24). Three decades later, the society, now called the “Gadianton robbers,” tried to convince the people that the time had passed for the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Christ (3 Nephi 1:5-7). Even after the signs of his birth were given, these robbers “did commit many murders” (3 Nephi 1:27). Though defeated for a time (3 Nephi 1:4), they managed to murder the chief judge (3 Nephi 7:1) and appoint their own king (3 Nephi 7:9). They murdered the prophets (3 Nephi 7:6) and “entered into a covenant to destroy the government” (3 Nephi 7:11). From Moroni’s words in Ether 8:22-24, it seems that secret societies typically destroy governments. Among the Nephites, they twice took political control (Helaman 6:38-39; 3 Nephi 7:5).

If a similar secret society existed in Jerusalem in the time of Lehi, we can logically expect that it, too, would have engaged in some of these same activities.¹¹ It would have sought to place its

¹⁰ Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, 98.

¹¹ A letter purportedly written by Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, to her sister in 1829 indicates that Jerusalem of Lehi’s time was destroyed because of the work of a “secret society,” which made its way to the New World and was had among the Nephites. The letter, however, was one of Mark Hoffman’s forgeries.

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own men in charge and would have resorted to murder if necessary. From Alma 37:30, we learn that it is typical of secret combinations to slay prophets.¹² Is it possible that the attempts to slay the prophets Jeremiah (Jeremiah 18:23) and Lehi (1 Nephi 1:18-2:1) resulted from such a conspiracy, designed to silence those who warned that Jerusalem would fall captive to Babylon?

There is, in fact, evidence from the Bible that there was such a secret combination in Jerusalem in Lehi's time. Ezekiel, a contemporary of Lehi, writing in the year 593 B.C.,¹³ saw in vision a group of seventy elders in the temple, doing things "in the dark . . . for they say, The Lord seeth us not" (Ezekiel 8:11-12).¹⁴ He was then shown in vision a group of 25 men living at Jerusalem. They were worshipping the sun, with their backs toward the temple (Ezekiel 8:16). When next he saw the group of 25, he was told that these "princes of the people" were the men responsible for the impending fall of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 11:1-13). Of particular note are the facts that (1) these men evidently thought their actions to be secret (Ezekiel 11:5), and (2) they had slain many people (Ezekiel 11:6; cf. Jeremiah 5:26-28; Ezekiel 7:23).

One of the men mentioned by Ezekiel was Jaazaniah, son of Azur (Ezekiel 11:1). The name of Jaazaniah, son of a Maachathite, is also known to us from a list of army captains (*sārīm*) who came to the Gedaliah at Mizpeh after the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:23; Jeremiah 40:7-8). A clay seal dating from about the time of the Babylonian captivity and found during excavations at Mizpeh (Tel en-Nasbeh), about eight miles north of

¹² Since the devil was considered to be the founder of these conspiracies, this is not surprising (2 Nephi 9:9; 26:22).

¹³ This was the sixth year of the captivity of Jehoiachin (Ezekiel 8:1).

¹⁴ Ezekiel was then living in Babylonia, having been one of those carried away captive in 598/7 B.C.

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Jerusalem, bears the inscription “Jaazaniah, servant of the king.” All of these may refer to the same man.

Gedaliah is known from examples of his seal of office (reading “Gedaliah, who is over the House”), found in archaeological excavations at Mizpeh and Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir, about 28 miles southwest of Jerusalem). He was a Jew appointed by the Babylonians to govern Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.¹⁵ Of the four captains (*sārīm*) who came to him at Mizpeh, one, Johanan son of Kareah (see also Jeremiah 43:2, 4-5), offered to slay one of the others, Ishmael son of Nethaniah, who had been commissioned by the Ammonite king to murder Gedaliah (Jeremiah 40:13-15). It is likely that Ishmael—himself “of the seed royal” (Jeremiah 41:1)—was seen as a claimant to the throne and hence a threat to the governor’s position.

Gedaliah, however, believing the rumor to be untrue, did not order the death of Ishmael. Not long afterward, Ishmael and ten of “the princes of the king” slew the governor and a large number of others at Mizpeh. The murder was kept secret for a short while but, ultimately, Ishmael had to flee to Ammon (Jeremiah 41; 2 Kings 23:25). The parallel with the Book of Mormon account of the murder of three Nephite chief judges is striking (Helaman 6:17-19; 3 Nephi 7).

The men involved in the murder of Gedaliah were quite possibly the same ones called “princes,” who, according to Ezekiel and Jeremiah, persecuted the Lord’s prophets and even had one of

¹⁵ Gedaliah, though one of the princes, was evidently a member of the pro-Babylonian party. It was his father, Ahikam, who had prevented Jeremiah’s death at the hands of the other princes (Jeremiah 26:24). For the genealogy of Gedaliah’s family, who served the kings of Judah before the arrival of the Babylonians, see Nili Fox, “Royal Officials and Court Families: A New Look at the מְלָכִים (*ymādīm*) in 1 Kings 12,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 54/4 (December 1996): 225-232.

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them brought back from Egypt to be killed (Jeremiah 26:20-24).¹⁶

Both Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12:10-11, 21-22; 23:1-2; 25:34-36) referred to the leaders of Israel as wicked pastors or shepherds, who scattered or killed the sheep.

Ezekiel condemned the inhabitants of Jerusalem for shedding blood (Ezekiel 22:1-2, 9, 12-13). He was particularly harsh in his assessment of the princes: "Behold, the princes of Israel, every one were in thee to their power to shed blood" (Ezekiel 22:6). He wrote of the conspiracy of the prophets and priests (Ezekiel 22:25-26), then added, "Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain" (Ezekiel 22:27). The parallel with the description of the "secret combinations" in the Book of Mormon, organized to get gain by means of murder, is remarkable (Helaman 6:17-19; 7:4-5).

Jeremiah likewise spoke out against the princes and other leaders, saying that they were deceiving the people and Jerusalem by saying that there would be peace (Jeremiah 4:9-10). Like Ezekiel, he spoke of the murders committed in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 4:31) and of those who sought to take the life of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 4:30). The princes retaliated by accusing the prophet of "weakening the hands" of the people (Jeremiah 38:4). Interestingly, one of the Hebrew letters found at Lachish and written about 588 B.C., during the siege of Jerusalem (that is, during the time of Jeremiah and only a few short years after Lehi's departure) mentions a letter from "the princes" (*šārīm*) saying that the words of someone (perhaps a prophet) "weaken the hands."¹⁷

¹⁶ See Lachish letter 3, written in Jeremiah's day, in which it is Coniah, son of Elnathan, commander (*šār*) of the army, rather than Elnathan, son of Achbor, who went into Egypt. An English translation of the text appears in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed., Princeton University Press, 1969), 322.

¹⁷ Lachish letter 6. For an English translation of the text, see *ibid.*

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It would be an understatement to say that Jeremiah was not on good terms with the leaders of Judah. They conspired against him, saying, "Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah" (Jeremiah 18:18). At one point, the priests, prophets, and people wished to slay him and complained of the prophet before the assembly of princes, who, however, declared that he was not worthy of death (Jeremiah 26:7-16). Ironically, it was the princes who later imprisoned Jeremiah in the house of Jonathan the scribe (Jeremiah 37:15). The prophet expressed to King Zedekiah his fear that he would be left to perish there, so the king had him transferred to the palace prison (Jeremiah 37:20-21). But the princes besought the king to execute Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:4).

The power of these *sārīm* is reflected in Zedekiah's admission that he could do nothing to stop them from taking the prophet, whom they then removed from the palace and placed in a pit full of mire (Jeremiah 38:5-6). The king subsequently allowed some of his loyal servants to deliver the prophet from the mire before he died (Jeremiah 38:7-13) and promised that he would not again turn him over to those who wished to kill him (Jeremiah 38:16). But he still feared the princes and requested that Jeremiah keep the content of their conversation secret from them (Jeremiah 38:24-27).

Jeremiah's major complaint against the princes was that they were leading the people astray in the matter of foreign policy. It was the Lord's intention to allow the Babylonians domination over the world. But the princes of Judah still clung to their old alliance with Egypt (Jeremiah 2:13-18, 36; 37:5-10; 42:7-19; 43:2; 44:12-14). Their belief that the Babylonian king, Nebuchadrezzar II, could not take their land was bolstered by a number of false prophets. Ezekiel spoke out against these false prophets (Ezekiel 13, especially verse 16) in terms very reminiscent of those of his contemporary, Jeremiah (Jeremiah 5:31; 6:13-14; 8:9-11; 14:14-15; 23:11-17, 21, 25-38; 27:1-18). One of Jeremiah's harshest critics was the false prophet Hananiah, son of Azur—perhaps the same Azur listed in Ezekiel 11:1 as father of the

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conspirator Jaazaniah (Jeremiah 28).

Nibley suggests that the power of the elders began in the time of Hezekiah (ca. 726-697 B.C.), a century earlier, when the king's attempts at reform "had been systematically frustrated by the *sarim*."¹⁸ While this was undoubtedly the time when the princes rose to great political power in the kingdom of Judah, it is possible that the secret plots were going on long before that time.

POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT OF THE AMMONITES

In the history of conspiracies against Israel, it is interesting to note the role played by the Ammonites and related peoples. For example, it was the Ammonite king who sent Ishmael to slay Gedaliah (Jeremiah 40:11, 14) and, after the deed had been accomplished, Ishmael fled to Ammon (Jeremiah 41:10, 15).¹⁹

It may be that the Ammonites had long been involved in secret plots formulated against Judah. They and their neighbors, the Moabites,²⁰ were the ones who hired Balaam to prophecy against Israel in the wilderness, and who would not allow Moses and his people to pass through their lands without a fight (Numbers 22-25).

At one point, we read that the Ammonites allied with the king of Maacah against Israel (2 Samuel 10:6-8; 2 Chronicles 18:6-7), reminding us that one of the princes who came

¹⁸ Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 97.

¹⁹ The attack on Judah and the land of Ammon by Nebuchadnezzar's army seems to have been for a single cause. On his way south, the Babylonian king resorted to divination to decide whether to attack the Ammonite capital of Rabbath or the Judaean capital of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 21:20-22; Ezekiel's polemic against Ammon begins in verse 28).

²⁰ The Moabites and Ammonites were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, (Genesis 19:36-38) and were excluded from the congregation of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:3).

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to Gedaliah at Mizpeh was Jaazaniah, son of a Maachathite (2 Kings 25:23; Jeremiah 40:8). The Maachathites and Geshurites were transjordanian neighbors of the Ammonites, with whom they are sometimes listed in Bible passages (Joshua 12:5-6; 13:10-13; Deuteronomy 3:13-16).

When Joash, king of Judah, was slain by a conspiracy of his own servants, the culprits were Zabad, son of an Ammonitess, and Jehoazabad, son of a Moabitess (2 Chronicles 24:25-27). Absalom, who revolted against his father David after slaying his half-brother Amnon, was the son of Maacah, daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur (2 Samuel 3:3; 1 Chronicles 3:2). He fled to his maternal grandfather after slaying Amnon (2 Samuel 13:37-38) and subsequently plotted the overthrow of his own father, after building up popular support by means of rhetoric and bribes (2 Samuel 15-18).

Rehoboam, son and successor of Solomon, was the son of an Ammonitess woman (1 Kings 14:21, 31; 2 Chronicles 12:13). It was he who, despising the counsel of older men (the elders who had served his father), followed the advice of his younger companions to reject some of the demands of the northern tribes. This led to the dissolution of the kingdom (1 Kings 12). Interestingly, he married one Maacah, daughter of his uncle Absalom, and their son Abijah reigned after him (2 Chronicles 11:20; 1 Kings 15:1-2, 13). The Ammonites thus had influence both in the palace and on the throne of Judah at various times.

Absalom's revolt against his father David is termed a "conspiracy" in 2 Samuel 15:12, 31. The Hebrew word is *qeser*, which derives from a root meaning "to encircle, to bind," and hence has reference to a group of plotters tied together by a common cause or perhaps even by oaths and penalties. Two of Judah's kings, Joash (2 Kings 12:20) and his son Amaziah (2 Kings 14:18-19; 2 Chronicles 25:27) were slain by such "conspiracies," the first of these led, as we have noted above, by an Ammonite. During that same time period, we read of "conspiracy" in the

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northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 15:15, 30), where a number of kings succeeded to the throne by murdering their predecessors.²¹ This is reminiscent of the actions of the Jaredite secret combinations, as recorded in the Book of Mormon (Ether, especially chapters 8-9).

That there was a conspiracy in Jerusalem in the days of Lehi is confirmed by Jeremiah 9:2-8, where we read of the “secret lying conspiracy” (the term is also used in Jeremiah 11:9; see 12:6). The Lord told Jeremiah that “a conspiracy is found among the men of Judah, and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Jeremiah 11:9). Ezekiel spoke of the same in these terms: “There is a conspiracy of [Jerusalem’s false] prophets in the midst thereof . . . they have taken the treasure and precious things” (Ezekiel 22:25). Again, we are reminded that the goal of the conspirators among the Nephites was to murder and “get gain.” The existence of a conspiracy is also suggested by the fact that Jeremiah’s enemies said, “Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah” (Jeremiah 18:18).

Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Lehi and Nephi may have learned by revelation of the intrigues going on in Jerusalem in their day. Lehi spoke of the “abominations” in Jerusalem and prophesied its destruction (1 Nephi 1:13, 18-19). Nephi, noting that he had “dwelt at Jerusalem” also wrote of the “works of darkness” and “doings of abominations” he had observed there (2 Nephi 25:2, 6, 9-10). In connection with the wickedness at Jerusalem, he noted the rejection of the prophets, the imprisonment of Jeremiah, and the attempt to slay his own father, Lehi (1 Nephi 7:14).

THE SECRET COMBINATION AMONG THE NEPHITES

One is intrigued by the possibility that the secret

²¹ For the conspiratorial actions of the princes of the kingdom of Israel, see Hosea 7:1-5; 9:15.

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combination among the Nephites had its origin in Jerusalem.²² Who, then, brought the organization to the New World? One possible answer is Laman and Lemuel or the sons of Ishmael, whose rebelliousness and attempts to slay Lehi and Nephi betray their true allegiance (1 Nephi 7:16-19; 16:37; 17:44; 2 Nephi 1:24; 5:3). Hugh Nibley hinted that Laman and Lemuel may have had such ties.²³ Nephi noted that they did not believe their father's prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem "and they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father" (1 Nephi 2:11-13; see also 1:20; 2:1; 7:14). He also recorded their declaration "that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people" (1 Nephi 17:22). This declaration is reminiscent of the words of Giddianhi, leader of the Gadianton band nearly six centuries later, who wrote that his "society and the works thereof I know to be good" (3 Nephi 3:9).

But the first appearance of the secret combination was among the Nephites, not the Lamanites (Helaman 1:9-12; 2:3-12). Since Nephi and those who followed him were righteous, if the introduction of the combination came from the Old World, it would more likely have been introduced by the Mulekites, who left Jerusalem not long after Lehi. At the time of Mosiah, descendants of the Mulekite colony merged with the Nephites (Omni 1:12-19). Nibley notes that the rebels in the Nephite nation often appear to be Mulekites, bearing Jaredite names.²⁴ They are apparently the "king-men" of the Book of Mormon, who sought to change the

²² While it is true that the Jaredites had such a conspiratorial group, the knowledge of its exact nature, including its oaths, was kept from the Nephites even after the Jaredite record was translated by king Mosiah₂ (Alma 37:29).

²³ See his discussion of the Laban incident in Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, 91-99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:242-246. It was the Mulekites who made contact with the last of the Jaredites (Omni 1:20-22).

THE SECRET COMBINATION AMONG THE NEPHITES

Nephite form of government (Alma 51, 60, 62).²⁵ This would be natural for a people who came to the New World in company with the last surviving son of king Zedekiah of Judah, named Mulek. The Hebrew word *melek* means “king” and the title “king-men” and “Mulekite” may be identical. In any event, the Book of Mormon record makes it clear that it was because of their “high birth” that they felt they should possess political power (Alma 51:8).

The king-men were evidently the same people who had supported Amalickiah in his bid to become king. From Alma 46:4, we learn that “they were the greater part of them the lower judges of the land, and they were seeking for power.” In ancient Israel, these judges were, as we have noted earlier, the elders. Thus the predecessors to the king-men were probably the “princes” in Jerusalem who convinced king Zedekiah to ignore the words of the prophets, thus contributing to the destruction of the kingdom, just as the Gadianton band nearly led to the destruction of the Nephite nation (Helaman 2:13; 6:38-40; 3 Nephi 9:9).

CONCLUSION

We cannot be certain of the origin of the secret combinations among the Nephites and related groups. But there is clear evidence in the Bible that there was a similar secret conspiracy in Jerusalem in Lehi’s day, whose influence may have spread to the New World. In both cases, the conspirators were nobles, elders who sought to increase their power among the people, and who rejected the message of the prophets. Thus, a system of leadership established for Israel in the days of Moses as an aid to government had become corrupted by the time of Lehi, with the elders or princes forcing their will on king and people alike.

²⁵ See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Caste,” in Stephen D. Ricks & William J. Hamblin (eds.), *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book & FARMS, 1990), 296-326.