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Jeremiah's Prophecies of Jesus Christ

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Chapter 11

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And now I would that ye should know, that even since the days of Abraham there have been many prophets that have testified these things; yea, behold, the prophet Zenos did testify boldly; for the which he was slain. And behold, also Zenock, and also Ezias, and also Isaiah, and Jeremiah, (Jeremiah being that same prophet who testified of the destruction of Jerusalem) and now we know that Jerusalem was destroyed according to the words of Jeremiah. O then why not the Son of God come, according to his prophecy? (Helaman 8:19-20)

The declaration in Helaman 8:19-20 suggests that several ancient prophets, including Jeremiah, had prophesied of the coming of Christ. But there are no specific prophecies of Christ in the biblical book of Jeremiah. To be sure, Jeremiah 31:31-34 speaks of a new covenant to be established, but it does not mention Christ, who brought that new covenant. How, then, do we explain Nephi's statement to the people in the city of Zarahemla that Jeremiah had prophesied of Christ.

THE HEBREW VERSION OF JEREMIAH

The Old Testament book of Jeremiah may seem rather straightforward at first, but it is an extremely complex work.

¹ Portions of this article were previously published in the *Orem Daily Journal*, November 22, 1998, under the title, "Jeremiah's Nonbiblical Writings."

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Though many of the prophecies bear dates (expressed in terms of the year of the reigning monarch), they do not appear in chronological order in the book. Jeremiah is, after all, not an historical book, but a collection of prophecies with an interspersing of personal recollections by the prophet.

The earliest portions of Jeremiah are actually chapters 26 and 27, which were written in the beginning of the reign of king Jehoiakim, and chapter 35, written while he was yet king. Chapter 25 is next, being dated to the first year of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and is closely followed by chapters 36, 45, and 46. And on it goes.

The lack of chronological order of the various revelations suggests that the book of Jeremiah is a later collection of separate documents, to which a preface was added (Jeremiah 1:1-3). Because it was not written as a single book, it is possible that some of Jeremiah's writings never made it into the collection.

THE SEPTUAGINT VERSION OF JEREMIAH

In the second or third century B.C., the books of the Old Testament were translated into Greek for the convenience of the Jewish community living in Alexandria, Egypt. This translation is known as the Septuagint. Its version of Jeremiah has the chapters in a different order than that found in the Hebrew text. Ironically, the Greek Jeremiah is an eighth shorter than the Hebrew, lacking a translation of some 2700 Hebrew words. Our modern English Bibles, being translated from the Hebrew, have the longer version and retain the chapter order found in the Hebrew text.

The Septuagint version of Jeremiah makes up for the missing portions by including two items not found in the Hebrew or English text. These are the writings of Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe (see Jeremiah 36:4) and a letter attributed to Jeremiah. Later versions of the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate Bibles separated these portions off and they became part of the Apocrypha, books whose canonicity had been questioned. They were part of earlier

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editions of the King James Bible and are still included in Catholic Bibles.

WRITINGS OF JEREMIAH THAT TESTIFY OF CHRIST

Six copies of the book of Jeremiah were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, along with a copy of the epistle of Jeremiah in Greek. One of the Jeremiah scrolls has a Hebrew version that follows the shorter Septuagint text. The Dead Sea Scrolls also include fragments of two texts about Jeremiah that are not in the Bible.

The idea that Jeremiah wrote more than is in the biblical book that bears his name is supported by early Christian tradition as well. We have, for example, the testimony of two second-century Church Fathers, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Writing of Christ's preaching to the dead while his body lay in the tomb, each of them attributed to Jeremiah a prophecy not found in the biblical account, in which the prophet wrote that the Lord would descend to preach salvation to the dead. Justin Martyr wrote:

And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out [by the Jews]:
"The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation." (*Dialogue with Trypho* 72)²

Irenaeus cites the same passage in *Against Heresies* 4:22.³

The *Book of the Bee*, written in the Syriac language in the thirteenth century by the Nestorian bishop Solomon, has preserved

² Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (orig. 1885; reprint Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:235.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:493-94. Irenaeus also cites the passage in *Against Heresies* 3:20.4, where he mistakenly attributes it to Isaiah. *Ibid.*, 1:451.

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an earlier tradition of another non-biblical prophecy of Jeremiah, declaring that,

This (prophet) during his life said to the Egyptians, "a child shall be born—that is the Messiah—of a virgin, and He shall be laid in a crib, and He will shake and cast down the idols." From that time and until Christ was born, the Egyptians used to set a virgin and a baby in a crib, and to worship him, because of what Jeremiah said to them, that He should be born in a crib. (*Book of the Bee* 32)⁴

The story is drawn from *The Lives of the Prophets* 2:8-10, a text that a number of scholars have suggested was originally written in Hebrew by Egyptian Jews during the lifetime of Jesus himself.⁵

Another Christian document known from medieval manuscripts in various languages is *4 Baruch*, which is subtitled "The Things Omitted from Jeremiah the Prophet." The Ethiopic version attributes the book to Jeremiah's scribe Baruch, but the Greek says it was written by Jeremiah. Chapter 9 has Jeremiah prophesying of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, of his selection of twelve apostles, of his death and resurrection after three days, and of his return in glory to the mount of Olives. According to the account, Jeremiah was stoned for this declaration.⁶

⁴ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Bee* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1886), 72.

⁵ For an English translation of the Jeremiah passage, see James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 2:387-88. Both *The Lives of the Prophets* and *Book of the Bee* include prophets of Christ attributed to other Old Testament prophets but not found in the Bible version of their books.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:424-25.

CONCLUSION

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The Book of Mormon confirms these earlier traditions about Jeremiah's prophecies of Christ, none of which were known in Joseph Smith's day. Nephi, the son of Helaman, spoke of "Jeremiah, (Jeremiah being that same prophet who testified of the destruction of Jerusalem) and now we know that Jerusalem was destroyed according to the words of Jeremiah. O then why not the Son of God come, according to his prophecy?" (Helaman 8:20).

According to 1 Nephi 5:13, the brass plates of Laban that Lehi's family brought from Jerusalem to the New World contained "many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah." Some of these prophecies may be represented in the various non-biblical texts we have discussed here.