Nephite History in CONTEXT
Artifacts, Inscriptions, and Texts Relevant to the Book of Mormon
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Apocryphon of Jeremiah (4Q385a)
Neal Rappleye

Background
Between 1947 and 1956, a few well preserved scrolls and tens of thousands of broken fragments were found scattered across eleven different caves along the northwest shores of the Dead Sea near Qumran. Now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, they are arguably the most significant discovery ever made for the study of the Bible and the origins of Judaism and Christianity. Among the writings found are the earliest copies of nearly every Old Testament book, many of the known apocryphal and pseudepigraphic works, and several other texts discovered for the first time at Qumran. Altogether, more than 900 different compositions were found, most of which are written in Hebrew, though some are in Aramaic and Greek. Various dating methods indicate that they were written over time between the late third century BC and the mid-first century AD.¹

One of the fragmentary, non-biblical texts found is a story about the prophet Jeremiah commonly called the “Apocryphon of Jeremiah,” although it has sometimes been called “A Jeremiah Apocryphon,” and “Pseudo-Jeremiah.” According to Geza Vermes, the text is “written in well-imitated biblical Hebrew,” and appears to date to around the first century BC.² The exact composition of the story is uncertain, and debate remains about which fragments belong to this text and which belong to a different story about Ezekiel, Jeremiah’s contemporary.³ In general, though, the story seems to focus around Jeremiah prophesying that a remnant of exiled Israel will return to their homeland only to be destroyed 490 years (ten jubilees) later for once again turning away from the Lord.⁴
Translation

The following excerpt is from 4Q385a frg. 18a–b col. i. The translation is from Kipp Davis, The Cave 4 Apocryphon of Jeremiah and the Qumran Jeremianic Traditions: Prophetic Persona and the Construction of Community Identity (Boston, MA: Brill, 2014), 132 (a transcription of the Hebrew can be seen on the same page), with annotations added:

Jeremiah the prophet from יְهوֹוָה's presence. [And the ]captive who were led captive [went up] from the land of Jerusalem, and they came [to Riblah,] to [the king of Babylon,] when Nebuzaradan, the overseer of the bodyguard had slaughtered [the people of G]od. And he took the furnishings from the house of God with the priests, [ ... ] the sons of Israel, and brought them to Babylon. And Jeremiah the prophet walked [with them as far as ]the river, and he instructed them concerning what they ought to do in the land of [their] captivity. [And they listened] to the voice of Jeremiah, to the words that God had instructed to him [for them to do. So they kept the covenant of the God of their fathers in the land of [their captivity. They turned ]from what they, their kings, priests, [and their princes ]had done[ ] ... [ ... ]profaned the name of God, to [sin].

Book of Mormon Relevance

This passage is generally believed to be part of either the introduction or the conclusion of the extant text. In it, Jeremiah travels to a river with the captives “from the land of Jerusalem” in the wake of the Babylonian invasion ca. 587–586 BC, counseling them along the way on how they should live while in captivity. The designation of the captives' homeland as the “land of Jerusalem,” which may actually occur twice in this Jeremiah apocryphon (cf. 4Q389 frg. i), is distinct from biblical references to Jerusalem and Judah. The phrase is not used anywhere in biblical texts, although fourteenth century BC tablets written in Akkadian use variations of an equivalent phrase (see pp. 6–12), indicating the great antiquity of this term for the region around Jerusalem.

Here in the Apocryphon of Jeremiah, Kipp Davis believes the phrase “land of Jerusalem” fits the overall “portrayal of ‘the land’ throughout the text,” which “is restricted only to the holy city.” While the text likely dates to the first century BC, this more restricted portrayal of the region as “the land of Jerusalem,” according to Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, “greatly enhances the sense of historicity of the whole, since Judah ... by this time consisted of little more than Jerusalem and its immediate environs.”

The setting of 1 Nephi is very similar to that of the Apocryphon of Jeremiah. Not only are the events in 1 Nephi contemporary to Jeremiah’s ministry (1 Nephi 7:14), but the story is about Jerusalem natives who departed from the land in the wake of a Babylonian invasion about a decade earlier (ca. 598–597 BC), in which the temple was ransacked and captives were taken (see 1 Nephi 1–2; cf. 2 Kings 24:9–17; 2 Chronicles 36:9–10; Jeremiah 37:1), and Judah was likely reduced to essentially a city-state centered in Jerusalem, the once “great city” (cf. 1 Nephi 1:4; 2:13; 10:3; 11:13). Then, like the captives in the Jeremiah apocryphon, Nephi and his family travel through the wilderness until reaching a river where they were
given further instructions and commandments through a prophet (Lehi), and received covenant promises from the Lord (see 1 Nephi 2–7). However, Nephi learned through prophetic means that in several hundred years his people would ultimately be destroyed for turning away from the Lord (1 Nephi 12:13–19).

Significantly, the phrase “land of Jerusalem” also shows up several times in 1 and 2 Nephi (see table). Furthermore, travel in and out of the city is always between “(the land of) Jerusalem” and the “wilderness,” with no mention of other settled territory in between (see 1 Nephi 2:2–4, 11; 3:2–4, 9–10, 17–18, 23–27; 4:1–4, 24–30, 38; 5:6; 7:1–7), indicating a similarly restricted portrayal of “the land” as little more than a city-state centered on the holy city itself. Given the similarities between the settings in both texts, we can reasonably say this “greatly enhances the sense of historicity” of Nephi’s narrative as well.23

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses of “Land of Jerusalem” in 1 and 2 Nephi*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi, headnote</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Lord warns Lehi to depart out of the land of Jerusalem ... Nephi taketh his brethren and returns to the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 2:11</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 3:9–10</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“go up to the land of Jerusalem ... we had gone up to the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 5:6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“journeyed in the wilderness up to the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 7:2, 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“again return into the land of Jerusalem ... desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 16:35</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“brought them out of the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 17:14, 20, 22</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“did bring you out of the land of Jerusalem ... hath led us out of the land of Jerusalem ... were in the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Nephi 18:24</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“brought from the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Nephi 1:1, 3, 9, 30</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“bringing them out of the land of Jerusalem ... flee out of the land of Jerusalem ... shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem ... brought out of the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Nephi 25:11</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“return again and possess the land of Jerusalem”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes


4 See Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2005), 439–446. Out of all the translations I've consulted, this one's arrangement of the fragments produces the most readable narrative.

5 In the early publications of this fragment, which predated the "official" publication in the Discoveries in the Judean Desert series, it was referred to as "fragment 1" of "Pseudo-Jeremiah" from scroll 4Q385 (or 4Q385b). See Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, trans., The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered: The First Complete Translation and Interpretation of 50 Key Documents withheld for over 35 Years (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1992), 57–58; Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, trans., The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English, 2nd ed. (New York, NY and Grand Rapids, MI: Brill and Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 285. Later it was classified as 4Q385b frg. 16 col. i, as seen in Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, trans., The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Brill, 1999), 2772–773. It's now referred to as 4Q385a frg. 18 col. i or 4Q385a frg. 18a–b col. i, as seen in Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446; Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader, 6 vols., 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 2:802–803; and Davis, Cave 4 Apocryphon of Jeremiah, 132.

6 All brackets and ellipses are in the original. I have omitted representation of the blank first line, and the lacuna at the beginning of the text.

7 The sense here may be that Jeremiah was leaving the Lord's presence, as indicated in several translations. Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602: "Jeremiah the Prophet [departed] from before the Lord (YHWH)"; Wise, et al., New Translation, "[... And ] Jeremiah the prophet, [went out] from before the LORD"; Devorah Dimant, trans., in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803: "[and] Jeremiah the prophet [went out] from before the Lord"; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773: "[... and ] Jeremiah the Prophet [went] from before YHWH." More consistent with Davis is Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58: "Jeremiah the Prophet before the Lord" and Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285: "Jeremiah the prophet before YHWH."

8 Several translators restore the lacuna at the beginning of this line as indicating that Jeremiah came and joined the captives. Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602: "... [to accompany the] captives who were taken captive from the land of Jerusalem"; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446: "[and went with the] captives who were taken captive from the land of Jerusalem"; Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803: "[and he went with the] captives who were led captive from the land of Jerusalem." More consistent with Davis are Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773: "[... the] exiles who were brought into exile from the land of Jerusalem"; Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58: "[... who] were taken captive from the land of Jerusalem"; Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285: "[... w]ho were made prisoners of Jerusalem."

9 Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602 restores "[to ... Nebuchnezzar]" (who was the king of Babylon at the time) here instead of "[to Riblah, to]" while Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773 just leave this space blank. Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 and Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803 are both consistent with Davis.

10 This differs from all other translations I've consulted, which typically leave this lacuna blank and opt for a less extreme term in the place of "slaughtered." Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602 and Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803 have "smote"; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 and Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773 each have "struck." Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58 and Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285 each stop after "guard" or "escort."

11 Most translations use "vessels" rather than "furnishings," suggesting that this refers to the sacred relics of the temple. See Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773; Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803; Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58; Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285. Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 has "utensils."

12 Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803 and Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 restore "the nobles" here. Consistent with Davis, Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773; Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58; Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285 all leave this lacuna blank.

13 Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773 and Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58 leave the lacuna before "the river" blank, while Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285 is even missing "the river." Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446; and Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803 are all consistent with Davis.

14 Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 602; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2773; Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803; Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 all indicate that Jeremiah "commanded" rather than merely "instructed" the captives. This is true in both instances of "instructed" in this passage. Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285 curiously has "laughed and told" here, and has "decreed" in the second instance of "instructed."
There is some variation in how the lacuna in this section is dealt with and translated. Vermes agrees with Davis that this indicates something the captives did, while Wise, et al. and Dimant both make it another of Jeremiah's commands. Martínez and Tigchelaar; Eisenman and Wise; and Martínez all leave it blank. Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 6:32: “And they obeyed] the voice of Jeremiah”; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446: “[that they should listen] to the voice of Jeremiah”; Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803: “[that they should listen] to the voice of Jeremiah”; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2:773: “[…] by the voice of Jeremiah”; Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58: “... to the voice of Jeremiah”; Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285: “[… ] by the voice of Jeremiah.”

Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 and Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803 simply have “commanded him [to do],” making Jeremiah, and not the people, the subject of the instructions or commands from God. Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2:773; Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58; Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 6:32; Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285 all leave the lacuna blank, which also effectively makes Jeremiah the subject of the command.

Owing to the fragmentary nature of these final lines, there are several differences in other translations that impact, at least somewhat, the meaning of the passage. Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 6:32: “And they were to keep the covenant of the God of their fathers in the land [of their captivity … and they were not to do] as they had done and their kings and priests [and … and they] profaned [the name] of God”; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446: “that they should keep the covenant that the God of their fathers had in the land [of Babylon, that they should not do] as they had done, they themselves, their kings, their priests, [and their princes … for they had] profaned [the name] of God”; Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:803: “and they should keep the covenant of the God of their fathers in the land [of Babylon and they shall not do] as they had done, they themselves and their kings and their priests [and their princes] [(namely, that) they defiled [the name] of God to] desecrate”; Martínez and Tigchelaar, Study Edition, 2:773: “they will keep the covenant of the God of their fathers in the land of [their exile …] as they and their kings, their priests did […] … […] God […]”; Martínez, Qumran Texts, 285: “they will keep the covenant of the God of their fathers in the country of [exile …] what they and their kings and their priests did […] God […]”.

Vermes, Complete Dead Sea Scrolls, 6:32 positions it at the beginning; Wise, et al., New Translation, 446 position it toward the end.

See also Davis, Cave 4 Apocryphon of Jeremiah, 142–143: “in the land of [Jerusalem]” (בארץ ירושלים). Wise, et al., New Translation, 444 and Dimant, in Parry and Tov, Reader, 2:814–815 restore it as “in the land of [Judah]” or “in the land of [Judaea]” (בארץ יהודה), but as Davis points out, “Judah” is never used in the extant text to refer to the land. Thus, he reasons that in light of 4Q385a frg. 18a–b col. i and the overall portrayal of the Jewish homeland in the text, “land of Jerusalem” makes better sense here.

Davis, Cave 4 Apocryphon of Jeremiah, 143.

Eisenman and Wise, Uncovered, 58.


Neal Rappleye

Background

The Amarna Letters make up the bulk of the 382 cuneiform tablets found at Amarna, Egypt in 1887. The letters date to the mid-fourteenth century BC (ca. 1365–1335 BC), with most of them coming from the reign of Akhenaten (ca. 1352–1336 BC), though some date to the reigns of Amenhotep III (ca. 1390–1352 BC) and perhaps Smenkhkara (ca. 1338–1336 BC) and Tutankhamun (ca. 1336–1327 BC). The collection includes international correspondence between Egypt and other nations, such as Assyria and Babylonia, but most of the letters are to and from vassal kings in the Syria-Palestine region, which was under Egyptian rule at the time.

These vassal rulers were often petitioning the pharaoh to take sides in petty squabbles between their city-states. Among them was ‘Abdu-Ḫeba, ruler of Jerusalem (Urusalim). ‘Abdu-Ḫeba wrote six surviving letters (EA 285–290), and three others mention him or Jerusalem (EA 289, 335, 366). As is typical of several of the other vassal kings, throughout his letters ‘Abdu-Ḫeba professes his loyalty to the pharaoh, complains that other city-states are waging war against him, and pleads for the pharaoh’s assistance. Yet letters from successive rulers of another city-state (EA 289, 335) suggest that in some cases, ‘Abdu-Ḫeba may have been the aggressor.
Translation


EA 287
Behold this land of Jerusalem: (It was) not my father (and) not my mother (who) gave it to me, (but) the arm of the mighty king (which) gave (it) to me. … [If] they send into the land [of Jerusalem]4 [troops], let them come with [an (Egyptian) officer for]5 (regular) service6 … [and] let my king requisition for them much grain,7 much oil, (and) much clothing, until Pawre, the royal commissioner, comes up to the land of Jerusalem. Addaya has left,8 together with the garrison (and) the (Egyptian) officer which my king had given (me). … So send me a garrison this [year], and send me a commissioner likewise, O my king. … Behold, the king has set his name in the land of Jerusalem for ever; so he cannot abandon the lands of Jerusalem!9

EA 289
Behold Milkilu and Tagu!10 The deed which they have done is this, that they(!) have taken it, the town of Rubutu.11 And now as for Jerusalem—Behold this land belongs to the king, or why like the town of Gaza is it loyal to the king?12 … Milkilu has written to Tagu and the sons of ⟨Lab’ayu⟩,13 (saying) “Ye are (members of) my house.14 Yield all of their demands to the men of Keilah,15 and let us break our alliance ⟨with⟩ Jerusalem!”16 The garrison which thou didst send through Haya, son of Miyare, Addaya has taken (and) had put into his residence in Gaza. … So now, as my king lives, … let the king send fifty men as a garrison to guard the land!

EA 290
Behold the deed which Milkilu and Shuwardata17 did to the land of the king, my lord! They rushed the troops of Gezer,18 troops of Gath, and troops of Keilah; they took the land of Rubutu; the land of the king went over to the ‘Apiru people.19 But now even a town of the land of Jerusalem, Bit-Lahmi by name,20 a town belonging to the king, has gone over to the side of the people of Keilah. Let my king hearken to ʿAbdu-Ḥeba, thy servant, and let him send archers to recover the royal land for the king!

Book of Mormon Relevance

These letters, written in a pre-Israelite era, may constitute the earliest extrabiblical reference to Jerusalem in the historical record.21 Combined with other letters written by or mentioning ʿAbdu-Ḥeba (EA 280, 285–290, 335, 366), a picture emerges depicting Jerusalem as a powerful city-state which dominated the southern highlands.22 Yet this picture does not square with the archaeology of Jerusalem,
which manifests little to no remains dated to the fourteenth century BC. As one archaeologist put it, “No trace has ever been found of any city that could have been the Urusalim of the Amarna letters.”

Scholars have dealt with this discrepancy in various ways, some arguing that the negative evidence of archaeology should not trump the clear, contemporary written sources, while others argue that the letters must be reinterpreted in light of the meager findings of archaeology. Regardless of how this problem is reconciled, it serves to illustrate an important point: written historical sources are not always supported by or consistent with the archaeological record. We should keep this in mind when studying the Book of Mormon in light of archaeology, and seek to both (1) reconsider archaeology in light of the text and (2) reinterpret the text in light of archaeology, just as scholars have done with the letters of ‘Abdu-Ḫeba and others in the Amarna archive.

‘Abdu-Ḫeba’s frequent use of terms translated as “land(s) of Jerusalem” (see table below) is interesting, considering the recurrent use of “land of Jerusalem” throughout the Book of Mormon and the equivalent Hebrew phrase which shows up in a first century BC fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls (pp. 1–5). Based on these sources, the Book of Mormon appears to be part of a long-standing tradition that connects Jerusalem with the region surrounding the city proper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Akkadian Terms Translated as “land(s) of Jerusalem” in the Amarna Letters*</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Akkadian</th>
<th>Literal Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EA 287, line 25</td>
<td>KUR URU Ū-ru-sa-lim</td>
<td>“the land of the city of Jerusalem”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 287, line 46</td>
<td>KUR URU Ū-ru-sa-limKl</td>
<td>“the land of the city of Jerusalem (a place)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 287, line 61</td>
<td>KUR Ū-ru-sa-limKl</td>
<td>“the land of Jerusalem (a place)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 287, line 63</td>
<td>KUR.HI.A URU Ū-ru-sa-limKl</td>
<td>“the lands of the city of Jerusalem (a place)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 290, line 15</td>
<td>URU KUR Ū-ru-sa-limKl</td>
<td>“a city of the land of Jerusalem (a place)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Even more interesting, in light of Book of Mormon statements about the Messiah’s birth (Alma 7:10), is the reference to Bit-Laḥmi as “a town of the land of Jerusalem.” The actual name in the text is Bit-Ninutra or Bit-Ninib, but Ninutra/Ninib is widely recognized as a logogram “masking” the name of the true deity intended by the reference, presumably the Mesopotamian god *Laḥmu,* though others have suggested the Amorite god *Horon,* the goddess ‘Anath, or the Canaanite sun-god *Shemesh.* Nonetheless, many biblical scholars accept the identification as Bit-Laḥmi, which is “an almost certain reference to the town of Bethlehem.”

If this association with Bethlehem is accepted, then this means that the small town that would later become famous as the birth place of Jesus (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4–7) was part of the “land of Jerusalem” at this time, and a recently discovered fiscal bulla confirms there was a similar relationship in place in Lehi’s day (see pp. 14–17). In that light, Alma’s declaration that the Son of God would be born “at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers” (Alma 7:10, emphasis added) should be understood as...
including Bethlehem.” Alma’s phrasing is even similar to ‘Abdu-Heba’s in EA 289: “And now as for Jerusalem—Behold this land belongs to the king” (emphasis added).

It is also interesting to note that ‘Abdu-Heba specifically requested “fifty men as a garrison to guard the land.” Several other letters mention fifty-man garrisons (EA 132, 139, 238, 295; cf. EA 366, “59 chariots”), and it appears to be a common or standard unit for a garrison in that period.39 Letters from both the Neo-Assyrian (ca. 911–612 BC) and Neo-Babylonian (ca. 626–539 BC) empires also indicate that fifty men was the standard military unit in the first millennium BC as well.38 In 1 Nephi, Laban, a military official in Jerusalem dreaded by Nephi and his brothers, “can command fifty” (1 Nephi 3:31; 41). Based on these sources, it seems likely that the “fifty” at Laban’s command was a standard-sized garrison stationed in the city.34

Notes


3 Albright is listed as the “translator” on p. 429, but at the bottom of that same page it states: “The translations offered below represent the combined work of W. F. Albright and George Mendenhall, with corrections by W. L. Moran, S. J.”

All ellipses are mine. All italics, parentheses, and brackets are from Albright. These are explained on Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near East, xxviii: “Within the translations certain conventions have been followed in the signs and notations. Italics have been used to designate doubtful translations of a known text and for transliterations of the original text. Square brackets are employed for restorations in the text made by the translator; round brackets (parentheses) have been put
around interpolations made for a better understanding of the translation; obvious scribal omissions have been placed between triangular brackets.


5 Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 328 has “[a garrison for]” in this lacuna. Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 113 has “[x number of].”

6 Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 113 provides a considerably different translation of this line: “Look, they sent from the [city] state of [Gaza(?)] support(!) troops with [x number of] slaves.” Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 328 is more consistent with Albright: “[and so if] he is going to send [troop]s into [Jerusalem], let them come with [a garrison for] (regular) service.”

7 Rather than “requisition” (i.e., procure by force), both Rainey and Moran have “inquire.” Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 113: “[So] may the king inquire concerning the[m]”; Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 328: “May the king inquire about [the[m]].”

8 Addaya was the resident Egyptian administrator or governor in Palestine, stationed in Gaza. See Albright, “Amarna Letters,” 439 n.21.

9 Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 328 has, “As the king has placed his name in Jerusalem forever, he cannot abandon it — the land of Jerusalem.” This is the only place where Moran translates the full phrase “land of Jerusalem,” which he has as a singular instead of the plural “lands of Jerusalem.” Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 113, has “Look, the king has established his name in the land of Jerusalem forever and he simply cannot abandon it, viz. the city state of Jerusalem.” According to W. S. Lasor, in the underlying Akkadian, the first mention of Jerusalem uses *mat* (or KUR, per Rainey, p. 112), “land” (*mat urusalim*5; Rainey: KUR Úrusalim5), while the second definitely uses the plural *matât* (or KUR.HLA, per Rainey, p. 112), “lands” (*matât urusalim*5; Rainey: KUR.HLA URU Úrusalim5). See W. S. Lasor, “Jerusalem,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2:999–1005. Moran typically omits “land of” (*mat* KUR) in his translations, while Rainey tends to use “land of” (*mat* KUR) and “city state” (*mat “X” KUR URU*) to distinguish between the presence and absence of the “city” determinative (“X” URU) in the underlying Akkadian. Regardless, in this passage, the sense of all three translations is that ’Abdu-Heba is referring to a broader region or territory by using first *mat* KUR and then *matât* KUR.HLA.


11 According to Moran, COS 3:238 n.7, Rubuttu was likely a town between Jerusalem and Gezer. Albright, “Amarna Letters,” 437 n.19 places it “somewhere in the region southwest of Megiddo and Taanach.”

12 The meaning of this passage is uncertain. As Albright renders it, ’Abdu-Heba is arguing that Jerusalem belongs to the king because it’s loyal, like Gaza. Yet Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 332 (cf. Moran, COS 3:238) has “And now for Jerusalem, if this land belongs to the king, why is it (not) of concern to the king if Hazzatu?” (Hazzatu = Gaza [see Moran, COS 3:238 n.8]), making it about why Jerusalem is not getting the same preferential treatment as Gaza. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 150 offer a similar translation: “Now, with Jerusalem threatened, why does the pharaoh not show the same concern expressed for Gaza?” Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1121 offers yet another interpretation: “[And] now as for the city of Jerusalem, if this land belongs to the king, why, as the city of Gaza belongs to the king, is it just sitting (isolated)?” This translation seems to be suggesting that ’Abdu-Heba is wondering why Jerusalem is left undefended, when Gaza—by the simple command of pharaoh—could come to his aide.

13 Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1121, has “sons (of Arṣaya/Lab’ayu).”

14 This is another passage that is uncertain. Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 333 (cf. Moran, COS 3:238) has “Be both of you a protection,” and Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1121, has “Be ye men!” Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 150 has “Let both of you obey me.” Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 333 n.9, notes several other proposed readings, including Rainey’s “be men,” “as for you, go on,” and Albright’s “you are of my house.” Cf. the discussion in Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1596.

15 Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 150 have “re-enforce our soldiers at Keilah.” More consistent with Albright, Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 333 (cf. Moran, COS 3:238) has “Grant all their demands to the men of Qiltu [Keilah].”
and Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1121 has “Grant their every request to the men of Qiltu (Keilah).” Qiltu/Keilah was approximately 12 miles southwest of Jerusalem. See Michael D. Coogan, ed., *A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Sources for the Study of the Old Testament* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 118 n.11.

20 Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 333 (cf. Moran, COS 3:23:38) has “let us isolate Jerusalem,” and Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 150 similarly has “we will isolate Jerusalem.” Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1121 has “let us desert Jerusalem.” Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 333 n.4, indicates that it’s literally “let us separate” or “let us desert.” In any case, the sense is that they are plotting against Jerusalem.

21 Shuwardata was another of the vassal kings in Palestine, though his territory is uncertain. Most scholars believe he was the over Gath (see Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 52 § 2.2.1.3) but Albright, “Amarna Letters,” 437 n.16 says he is the ruler of Hebron, and Coogan, *A Reader*, 118 n.11 says he is the ruler of Keilah.

22 Rather than “rushed,” Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 334 has “ordered” and Wayne T. Pitard, “Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65 has “led,” while Rainey, *El-Amarna Correspondence*, 1125 has “assembled(!).” Moran, *Amarna Letters*, 334 n.2 mentions other proposals, such as “they hired” and “they were taken in” and Rainey’s “they assembled.”

23 There is considerable debate among scholars over the meaning of ‘apiru (sometimes hapiru or even habiru) and just who these people were and whether the name is etymologically related to the term Hebrew (‘ibri). If so, the mention of ‘apiru in these and other texts may hold some clues as to the origins of the Israelites (i.e., the Hebrews). See Carol A. Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” in *Oxford History of the Biblical World*, 97–98; Robert B. Coote, “Hapiru, Apiru,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 549–553; Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 52–53 § 2.2.1.3.


25 Lasor, “Jerusalem,” 999, 1004 and Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 44 § 2.1.2.1 both mention possible earlier references (ca. eighteenth–nineteenth century BC) in Egyptian Exegesis texts (as *rws3mm*), though Grabbe notes that “the reading ‘Jerusalem’ has been questioned” by Naʾaman, “Canaanite Jerusalem,” 278–279.


Na’aman, “Canaanite Jerusalem,” 281–283 argues that the region under Jerusalem’s direct domain spanning thousands of years was more or less the same as that of the “land of Jerusalem” in the Amarna Letters. So these later references to the “land of Jerusalem” in the Book of Mormon and Dead Sea Scrolls likely refer to approximately the same territorial region surrounding Jerusalem.


Proposals that Ninurta/Ninib is actually Horon, ‘Anath, or Shemesh (see n.28) naturally lead to different conclusions about what biblical city or town is associated with Bit-Ninurta or Bit-Ninib, namely Beth-Horon, Beth-shemesh, or Beth-‘Anath. In addition to these, most recently Amir Feldstein, “The Kingdom of Jerusalem in the ’El-Amarna’ Period,” New Jerusalem Studies 22 (2017): 41–51 (written in Hebrew, English summary on pp. 7*–8*) has proposed Kirjath Jearim. Rainey, El-Amarna Correspondence, 27 appears to favor Beth-Horon, but admits that the question “remains a point of intense controversy.” Due to this controversy, Coogan, A Reader, 118 n.15 simply says the location is “unknown.” Campbell, Ruth, 54 notes the dispute but reasons that Bethlehem is “probably attested” by the name, and while they argued for Beth-Horon, Kallai and Tadmor admitted that Bethlehem was the “most widely accepted identification” (Kallai and Tadmor, “Bit Ninurta = Beth Horon,” English summary, p. 138). The identification as Bethlehem continues to be widely accepted by biblical scholars today (see n.29). Nonetheless, Beth-shemesh (19 miles), Beth-Horon (12 miles), and Kirjath Jearim (7 miles) are all farther from Jerusalem than Bethlehem (5 miles), so even if one of these alternative proposals is correct, Bethlehem would still be part of the “land of Jerusalem” (Beth-‘Anath cannot be confidently identified on a map). Certainly, the reconstruction of the


Background
Some of the most important and valuable inscriptions from ancient Israel and the surrounding region are the short inscriptions written on tiny seals, typically used for enclosing documents to ensure it is authentic and has not been tampered with. Such seals are usually made out of a semi-precious stone (though other materials were also used) and typically have the owners name inscribed on it, thus binding important documents with his or her “signature.” Nearly 3000 seals and clay seal impressions (called bulla; pl. bullae) have been found in Israel and the surrounding region, dating from the tenth–sixth centuries BC, although the largest portion of them come from the eighth–seventh centuries BC.¹

Out of those thousands of seals and bullae is a small handful of seal impressions known as “fiscal bullae,” which sealed tax shipments paid in kind (i.e., silver, wine, or grain).² There are approximately fifty examples of such bullae, all of which date to between the eighth–seventh centuries BC. Some follow the typical pattern of having the name of their owners inscribed on them, but most (about thirty-five) feature the name of the city from which the taxes were paid “to the king.” The majority of these are unprovenanced, but three were found between 2011–2013 within controlled archaeological digs in Jerusalem, including the so-called “Bethlehem Bulla.”³

According Eli Shukron, one of the excavators, the Bethlehem bulla was likely attached to “a shipment [that] was dispatched from Bethlehem to the king in Jerusalem.”⁴ Exactly which king remains uncertain. The initial archaeological context suggested “a date within the eighth–seventh centuries BCE,” but the limited paleographic evidence seems to favor a seventh century date,⁵ or
possibly even the late “seventh to the early sixth centuries.” According Shukron, dates in the reign of either Hezekiah (ca. 726/715–697/686 BC), Manasseh (ca. 697/686–642 BC), or Josiah (ca. 640–609 BC) are all possible.7

Translation
The following translation is based on Martin Heide, “Some Notes on the Epigraphical Features of the Phoenician and Hebrew Fiscal Bullae,” in Recording New Epigraphic Evidence: Essays in Honor of Robert Deutsch on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, ed. Meir Lubetski and Edith Lubetski (Jerusalem: Leshon Limudim, 2015), 72 (transcription of the Hebrew can be seen on this same page),8 with annotations added:

In the seventh (year).9
[B]ethlehem.10
[For the kin]g.11

Book of Mormon Relevance
In the late eighth through the seventh century BC, the kingdom of Judah was divided into separate administrative districts for tax collection and other organizational purposes.12 Jerusalem, according to Yohanan Aharoni, did “double duty” as both the royal capital and the administrative center of one of these districts.13 Nadav Na’aman explained, “Jerusalem was located in the centre of a sort of district, which encompassed the capital and its periphery, including the agricultural areas of the city’s residents, as well as satellite settlements directly connected to Jerusalem proper.”14

The discovery of the Bethlehem bulla right in Jerusalem is evidence that Bethlehem was one of these “satellite settlements” linked directly to the capital city. This suggests continuity between the territorial relationships in the Jerusalem region from seventh century BC all the way back into the Amarna period (fourteenth century BC),15 when Bethlehem was identified as “a town in the land of Jerusalem” (see pp. 6–13).

Lehi grew up in Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:4) during Josiah’s reign, and probably even began raising his family while Josiah was still king.16 This fiscal bulla thus indicates that Bethlehem was directly “linked to the nearby city of Jerusalem,”17 within or close to Lehi’s lifetime. To the extent that knowledge of their Jerusalem homeland was passed on at all to future generations (see 2 Nephi 25:6), the memory of this connection may have impacted traditions of the Messiah’s birth among the Nephites. Whereas early Christian tradition states that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:11; Luke 2:4–7), Nephite tradition stated that he was born “at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers” (Alma 7:10, emphasis added), which they probably understood to include Bethlehem as a “satellite settlement.”18

Notes


3 The first was the Gibeon bulla; see Gabriel Barkay, “A Fiscal Bulla from the Slopes of the Temple Mount—Evidence for the Taxation System of the Judean Kingdom,” ירושלם בחקר ירושלים 17 (2011): 151–178 (written in Hebrew, see English summary at the end of the paper). The Bethlehem Bulla was the second; see Ronny Reich, “A Fiscal Bulla from the City of David,” Israel Exploration Journal 62, no. 2 (2012): 200–205. The third is the Eltekon bulla; see Gabriel Barkay and Robert Deutsch, “Another Fiscal Bulla from the City of David,” New Studies on Jerusalem 22 (2017): 115–121 (written in Hebrew, see English summary on pp. 11*–12*). These articles also provide information on the number of fiscal bullae and their general dating.

4 Shukron, in “Bulla Bearing the Name Bethlehem.”

5 Reich, “Fiscal Bulla,” 204.


7 Shukron, in “Bulla Bearing the Name Bethlehem.”

8 Hiede did not include brackets to correctly represent the parts of the translation that are a restoration, so I’ve added them for clarity. I’ve also changed Hiede’s brackets on “year” to parentheses (consistent with Reich, “Fiscal Bulla,” 201) so as not to confuse this added word from the translator (usually placed in parentheses) with restorations to the underlying Hebrew, shown in the brackets I’ve added.


10 Reich, “Fiscal Bulla,” 201 renders this literally as Beit Leḥem, which is the Hebrew transliteration for Bethlehem (p. 203; “Beit Lehem is identified with the city of Bethlehem”). Shanks, “Bethlehem’ from IAA Dig,” 12 adds “(taxes from the City of) [B]ethlehem,” clarifying that Bethlehem is the place the taxes are from.

11 Shanks, “Bethlehem’ from IAA Dig,” 12 has “to (or ‘for’) the king.” The common term lmlk (למלך) widely attested on seals, bullae, and store jar handles for this period, literally means “belonging to the king.”


16 John L. Sorenson, “The Composition of Lehi’s Family,” in By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley, 2 vols., ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 2379 places Lehi’s birth around 639 BC, near the beginning of Josiah’s reign, and his marriage to Sariah around 621 BC, at the height of Josiah’s reign. Sorenson’s age estimates for Lehi’s sons (pp. 175–176, 177–179) require that Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi all be born by 644 BC, several years still before Josiah’s reign ended ca. 609 BC. Note, however, John L. Sorenson, Nephi and the Kingdom of Judah: By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley, 2 vols., ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 23 states that he was persuaded Lehi departed from Jerusalem ten years later than originally supposed. Since his estimate for Lehi’s age was based on assumptions about Lehi’s sons ages upon departure, this obviously changed things, presumably shifting Lehi’s birth to ca. 630 BC, and similarly shifting his marriage and the birth of his children by about ten years. Other proposals for Lehi’s birth date include: H. Donl
