

The Lachish Letters

Documents from
Lehi's Day

By Hugh Nibley



About twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem in Lehi's day lay the powerfully fortified city of Lachish, the strongest place in Judah outside of Jerusalem itself. Founded more than three thousand years before Christ, it was under Egyptian rule in the fourteenth century B.C. when the Khabiri (Hebrews) had just arrived. At that time, its king was charged with conspiring with the newcomers against his Egyptian master. A later king of Lachish fought against Joshua when the Israelites took the city about 1220 B.C. In a third phase, either David or Solomon fortified it strongly.

The city's strategic importance down through the years is reflected in the Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, and biblical records. These describe a succession of intrigues, betrayals, sieges, and disasters that make the city's story a woefully typical Palestinian "idyll." Its fall in the days of Jeremiah is dramatically recounted in a number of letters found there in 1935 and 1938. These original letters, actually written at Jeremiah's time, turned up in the ruins of a guardhouse that stood at the main gate of the city—two letters a foot beneath the street paving in front of the guardhouse, and the other sixteen piled together below a stone bench set against the east wall. The wall had collapsed when a great bonfire was set against it from the outside.¹

The bonfire was probably set by the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar because they wanted to bring down the wall, which enclosed the gate to the city.

Nebuchadnezzar had to take the city because it was the strongest fortress in Israel and lay astride the road to Egypt, controlling all of western Judah. Jeremiah tells us that it and another fortified place, Azekah, were the last to fall to the invaders. (See Jer. 34:7.) An ominous passage from Lachish

Letter No. 4:12-13 reports that the writer could no longer see the signal-fires of Azekah—that means that Lachish itself was the last to go, beginning with the guardhouse in flames.

The letters survived the heat because they were written on potsherds.

They were written on potsherds because the usual papyrus was unobtainable. It was unobtainable because the supply from Egypt was cut off. The supply was cut off because of the war.

The letters were in the guardhouse because they were being kept as evidence in the pending trial of a military commander whose name was Hoshacyah.

He was being court-martialed because he was suspected of treason.

He was suspected of treason because someone had been reading top-secret dispatches sent from the court at Jerusalem to the commander at Lachish, whose name was Yauish.

Hoshacyahu was a likely suspect because all the mail had to pass through his hands.

It had to pass through his hands because he was in command of a fortified town on the road between Jerusalem and Lachish, probably Qiryat Ye'arim. His duty, among other things, was to forward the king's mail—not to read it.

That the confidential letters had been read was apparent because somebody had tipped off a certain prophet that he was in danger.

He was in danger because the king's soldiers had been put on his trail.

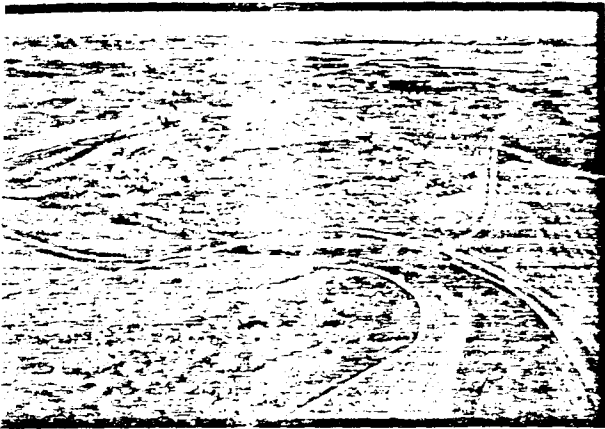
They were on his trail because he was fleeing to Egypt.

He was fleeing because he was wanted by the police in Jerusalem.

He was wanted by the police because he and other prophets were considered by the king's supporters to be subversives.

They were considered subversives because they were

Photo courtesy of Richard O'Leary



Highways and farmland of modern-day Tel Lachish.

opposing the official policy and undermining morale by their preaching. As Jeremiah puts it: "The princes [the important people] said unto the king: We beseech thee, let this man be put to death: for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them." (Jer. 38:4.) As Lachish Letter No. 6:6 puts it: "The words of the [prophet] are not good [and are liable] to loosen the hands." The Book of Mormon adds another reinforcement: "In that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city of Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Ne. 1:4) — disheartening news, indeed.

The Lachish Letters may be dated with considerable accuracy owing to the discovery in 1935 of another layer of ashes beneath them to match the one in which they were found. The two layers represent the destructions of 597 (three years after Lehi left) and the final burning in 588. The letters come between those two dates; comparison of names and potsherds shows that they were

all written at the same time, "not long before the final destruction . . . in 588." (P. 68.)

The prophet who was tipped off to escape "was surely Uriah of Qir-yat-Ye'arim," according to Torczyner. Jeremiah tells us a bit of his story:

"And there was also a man who prophesied in the name of the Lord, Urijah the son of Shemaiah of Kirjath-jearim, who prophesied against this city and against this land according to all the words of Jeremiah:

"And when Jehoiakim the king . . . heard his words, the king sought to put him to death: but when Urijah heard it, he was afraid, and fled, and went into Egypt.

"And Jehoiakim the king sent men into Egypt, namely, Elnathan the son of Achbor. . . .

"And they fetched forth Urijah out of Egypt, and brought him unto Jehoiakim . . . who slew him." (Jer. 26:20-23; italics added.)

In Lachish Letter No. 3:13-18, Hoshayahu says that it was reported to him that "the commander of the army [Yi] khbaryahu the son of Elnathan went down to Egypt" to fetch something, that other men were sent, and that there was a letter of warning to the prophet. Elnathan son of Achbor was an important man, very much in on the action. (See Jer. 36:12; 35:25; 26:22.) What is the likelihood of another high military commander by the name of Achbor, son of Elnathan, being sent on an identical mission to Egypt? The Bible story and the Lachish Letters are full of such striking coincidences. Letter 4:6-7 tells of a man with the same peculiar name as Uriah's father, Shema^cyahu, going up from Uriah's village to Jerusalem on urgent business, accompanied by the chief inspector of military outposts. On what business? Perhaps, Torczyner suggests, "to use his influence with the king" in behalf of his son. (P. 86.)

Furthermore the scribe of Jeremiah keeps assigning the Uriah episode to the time of Jehoiakim (608-597 B.C.); but scholars now agree on the evidence of Jeremiah 27:1-3 that the incident rightfully belongs to the reign of Zedekiah. (P. 69.)

In Letter No. 4:3-4, Hoshayahu assures his superior in Lachish that he has carried out his written orders to the letter: "According to whatever my lord has sent, so has thy servant done." Furthermore, "I have written down in the *deleth* whatever my lord has sent [written] me." Plainly he copied it down for the official record. Though "the Bible throughout speaks of rolls of writing," meaning papyrus or, more rarely, parchment rolls (p. 16), Letter 4 specifically uses the rare word *deleth* for the form in which Hoshayahu copied down or registered his official correspondence. Torczyner assumed that *deleth* must refer to a "papyrus sheet" or "page," since a *deleth* is not a roll and is certainly not a potsherd. (P. 80.) An alternative is a tablet or plate of solid material.

Even without the archaeological sites, the setting and situation in which the letters were written could be determined by their style as well as their content. They contain "90 lines of clear writing, beautiful language and highly important contents." (P. 15.) The language is pure Hebrew, most closely resembling that of the books of Jeremiah and of Kings. (P. 17.) They show, to everyone's surprise that in 600 B.C. "writing was almost common knowledge, and not a secret art known only to a few." (P. 15.) But they also show that the Egyptian scribal tradition at that particular time exerted a major influence in official record keeping throughout the Near East. The kings who attacked Jerusalem from the east at the time brought "two scribes" with "every expedition," writes A. T.



The Lachish letters survived a fire because they were written on potsherds — pieces of pottery.

cultures from the Old World to the New. Lehi's ties to the Yahvist tradition are also reflected in the only female name given in his history, that of his wife, Sariah.

The Lachish Letters center on the activities of the prophets, who are causing grave concern to the government. On an identical note the Book of Mormon opens: "And in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city of Jerusalem must be destroyed." (1 Ne. 1:4.) The identity of all but two of these prophets has now been lost, but it is clear from both the Lachish Letters and the Book of Mormon that there were more of them. "It must certainly be admitted," concludes Torczyner, "that there was more than one prophet at this time." (P. 65.)

The central figure is, of course, Jeremiah, but it is only by chance that we know even about him, for he is not even mentioned in the book of Kings—it is the prophetess Huldah, "an otherwise quite unknown figure," whom Josiah consults. (P. 71.) Jeremiah in turn happens to mention the prophet Uriah "in only a few passages," and his

name turns up nowhere else, though Uriah's "religious influence must have been of great extent and long standing!" (P. 70.) Uriah "prophesied against this city according to the words of Jeremiah." (Jer. 26:4.)

The words of such prophets were dangerously undermining morale both of the military and the people. Lachish Letter 6:5-6 protests: "Behold the words . . . are not good, to weaken the hands . . . of the country and the city." (P. 64.) The identical idea appears in Jeremiah 38:4. And so to the Book of Mormon. Lehi was one of those distressed and discouraged by the preaching of the "many prophets." As he "went forth," he "prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people." (1 Ne. 1:5.) In reply to his prayer he received a vision which sent him out to join the prophets: "My father . . . went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them" his vision. (1 Ne. 1:18.) He indeed was teaching in the spirit of Jeremiah, for Nephi explicitly links him to the prophet's vicissitudes: "For behold, they have rejected the prophets, and Jeremiah have they cast into prison. And they have sought to take away the life of my father, insomuch that they have driven *him* out of the land." (1 Ne. 7:14; italics added.)

Torczyner suggests that Uriah "may have hidden in the hills of western Judah for a long time" (p. 70), and we find Lehi doing the same thing. Indeed, as Torczyner points out, what we are dealing with here is a type of thing, Uriah's story being told "only as *parallel* to Jeremiah's not less dangerous position." (P. 69.) To their number we may add Lehi, whose story has every mark of authenticity.

As the Book of Mormon leads us into a world of Rechabites (see Jer. 35) of the desert, so the Lachish Letters give us "for the first time . . . authentic and in-

timite reports from Jews faithfully following their God [and] about their inner political and religious struggle."

Torczyner sees in the *-yahu* names a sure indication of "a loyal reformist faction which included even the highest military officers." Yaush and his men are the prophet's followers (p. 66), even though they are necessarily the king's defenders. We see Uriah hiding out in the hills "where he had friends and followers, for a long time." (P. 70.)

The Dead Sea Scrolls have put flesh on these sectarian bones, showing how from the earliest times communities of the faithful would withdraw from Jerusalem to bide their time in the wilderness. The pattern is familiar to readers of the Book of Mormon, who recall that Lehi "went forth among the people" as a prophet (1 Ne. 1:18), but, badly received, he was warned in a dream that his life was in danger and ordered to go into the wilderness, leaving all his worldly things behind (see 1 Ne. 2:1-2).

It was the idea behind the Rechabites and the people of Qumran: Nephi, inviting a new recruit to come and "have place with us," points out to him that only so could he "be a free man like unto us," and that to "go down in the wilderness" was the only way to "be diligent in keeping the commandments of the Lord." (1 Ne. 4:33-34.) So Zoram duly takes an oath and joins the company.

The Rechabite ideal of the desert sectaries was in full flower in Lehi's day, as many other sources now indicate. From the accusation that Nephi's elder brothers brought against him, it is clear they knew all about that sort of thing, for they complain that he was planning to set up such a society with himself as "our ruler and our teacher," leading them by his false claims of prophetic inspiration to believe "that the Lord has talked with

him. . . thinking, perhaps, that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness [some unoccupied tract]; and after he has led us away, he has thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us." (1 Ne. 16:37-38.) When, after eight years of wandering, the party was commanded to build a ship and sail on the waters, they were all at their wits' end, because they had never dreamed of such a thing as a promised land beyond the sea; theirs was strictly the tradition of the desert sectaries, "a lonesome and a solemn people," as Nephi's brother put it. (Jacob 7:26.)

Against the larger background of national calamity which is never lost from view, both the Lachish Letters and the Lehi story are concerned with relatively narrow circles of friends and relations. Clandestine flights from the city in both stories involve friends and families; Nephi and his brethren go back to town to persuade Ishmael and his family to join them in flight. But soon the group begins to split up as Laman, Lemuel, and the two daughters of Ishmael whom they have married, as well as two of Ishmael's sons, vote to return to Jerusalem, unable to give up their opulent life-style and renounce their fashionable friends:

"Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time we might have enjoyed our possessions and . . . been happy.

"And we know that the people . . . of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord. . . . They are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them." (1 Ne. 17:21-22.)

They are especially disgruntled at having to defer to a quality in their father for which the Lachish Letters have a particular expression, characterizing the man of prophetic calling as *ha-piqqeah*, which Torczyner translates as "the open-eyed or

visionary man" (p. 53), "the seer," "the man whose eyes God has opened to see" (p. 65) things that other people do not see. For the followers of a prophet the term was the highest of praise; for his critics, a label of derision:

"They did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a *visionary man*, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things. And this they said he had done because of the *foolish imaginations of his heart*." (1 Ne. 2:11; italics added.)

Torczyner explains the word by reference to 2 Kings 4:20, where Elisha asks the Lord to open the eyes of a certain ordinary man so he could see the horses and chariots of fire which otherwise only Elisha could see.

If the Lachish Letters reflect "the mind, the struggles, sorrows, and feelings of ancient Judah in the last days of the Kingdom" (p. 18), so to an even greater extent does the book of Nephi, where families split along political lines in a tragic conflict of loyalties. And if the situation of Uriah parallels that of Jeremiah, as Torczyner points out, even more closely does it parallel that of Lehi when we learn from the Letters of "a warning from the prophet to one of his friends, who is apparently in the same danger as he, himself. It is, therefore, a prophet fleeing from his home and his friends, a prophet wanted by the military authorities." (P. 64.)

As we saw earlier, the sender of nearly all of the Letters is a high military officer suspected by one party of treachery to the king in aiding the prophet, and by the other of betraying the prophet by revealing the contents of his warning letter to the king. (P. 113.) Likewise his superior officer, Yaush, who has been ordered to investigate him, "appears to be on the best of terms

with the king. But still both men respect the prophet and believe in him in spite of the king's attitude towards him, and their hearts ache that they should be responsible for his destruction." (P. 113.) The same tragic confusion exists in the Lehi story.

Furthermore, the actors in both dramas have ties to the Egyptians. Though Lehi supports the anti-Egyptian party, his sons have Egyptian names and Egyptian educations and they keep their records after the Egyptian manner. Moreover, the party flees toward Egyptian territory. The same anomaly confronts us in the Lachish Letters, which tell of a certain general sent down to Egypt to fetch a prophet back to Jerusalem for execution. (P. 63.) But why on earth, asks Torczyner, would the good man flee to Egypt of all places, when his crime was supporting Jeremiah in calling "for peace with *Babylonia*?" Our informant finds it "astonishing" that he fled towards Egypt instead of Babylonia.

As the main actors in the Lachish drama are high military officers, so in the Book of Mormon does Laban, whose official position resembles that of Yaush in Lachish, play a key role. Torczyner postulates that "Yaush must be the military governor of Lachish" and possibly "governor of the city, whose archives would probably have been housed in the region of the palace-fort or keep." (Pp. 87, 12.) Similarly, Laban was a powerful leader in Jerusalem, "a mighty man" apparently in command of at least fifty men and possibly even of tens of thousands. (See 1 Ne. 3:31; 4:1.)

Where is the king in all this? In both stories he appears as a rather weak character in the background. As for Yaush, "the king appeals to him in everything concerning this part of the country" (p. 118), that is, the whole western part of the kingdom (p. 87), and Laban would probably

Olmstead, "the chief with his stylus and tablets, his assistant with a papyrus roll or parchment and Egyptian pen."² The assistant was needed not so much for his skill with Egyptian writing materials, which had been introduced quite recently in the time of Tiglath-Pileser III and which anyone could learn to handle, but for the same reason "the court found it necessary to possess an Aramaic scribe" — namely to deal with the language,³ so widespread was the Egyptian tradition of record keeping at the time. Would the Egyptian scribes of a Babylonian or Assyrian king employ their skill to write in cuneiform or any other language but Egyptian? There were plenty of native scribes for that. Though a wealth of cuneiform writings on clay have been found in Egypt, cuneiform writings on papyrus are not known in the East.

Even more than the language and style of the letters, the proper names they contain in abundance place them in a neat and narrow segment of the time spectrum. They are peculiar names, characteristic of just one period in Jewish history, and likewise peculiar to the Book of Mormon. First, however, we should take note of the most frequently occurring name in the Letters, that of Yaush, the high commander of Lachish, which Torczyner anglicizes as Jaush. The name is not found in the Bible, but it is found in the Book of Mormon where Josh is a high military officer commanding a force of 10,000 troops. (See Morm. 6:14.) Needless to say, in the past critics of the Book of Mormon have made merry in citing it as another example of Joseph Smith's supposed hayseed mentality. Josh indeed!

More important from the Book of Mormon point of view is the peculiar type of names turning up in the Lachish Letters. They are characteristic of just one

period in the history of Judah, namely the days of Lehi.

Seven of the nine proper names in Letter No. 1 end in *-yahu* (Jehovah), and in all the letters there are no *Baal* names and no *Ei* names — the lack of which was once thought to be a serious defect in the Book of Mormon. Most important, Torczyner finds many names "compounded with *-iah*" (or *yahu*), also found about a century later among the Jews in Elephantine in Egypt, who were "perhaps the descendants of those Jews who after the fall of the Judaeen kingdom went down to Egypt, taking with them the prophet Jeremiah." (p. 27.)

Here we have another control over the Lehi story. For the discovery of the Elephantine documents in 1927 showed that colonies of Jews actually did flee to the desert as Lehi did — during Lehi's lifetime, and for the same reasons. Arriving in their new home far up the Nile, they built a temple similar to Solomon's temple, exactly as Lehi's righteous children did upon landing in the New World. Both of these oddities, and especially the temple, were once thought convincing refutations of the Book of Mormon.

The *-yahu* endings of personal names abound at Elephantine, but in a more abbreviated form, *-iah*, than at Lachish (*-yahu*) a hundred years earlier. Both forms are found in the Book of Mormon. For example, the Lachish name *Mattanyahu* appears at Elephantine as *Mtn(ii)*, and in the Book of Mormon both as Mathoniah and Mathoni. Of the two names in Letter No. 1 not ending in *-yahu*, one is *Tb-shlm* (which Torczyner renders *Tobshillem*), which suggests Book of Mormon *Shilom* and *Shelera*, while the other, *Hgb*, (Torczyner suggests *Hagab*) resembles Book of Mormon *Hagoth*. The Book of Mormon has both long and short forms in the names *Amalickiah*, *Amaleki*,

and *Amlici*. The Elephantine form *MLKih*, is very suggestive. (P. 24.) The Assyrian inscriptions show that the final "h" was dropped in the Hebrew spelling after Lehi left, when the Jews "lost their pronunciation of the consonant 'H' under the influence of the Babylonian language." (P. 25.)

More significant are the indications that the *-yahu* names are "certainly a token of a changed inner-Judaeen relationship to Yahwh." Such reformations, Torczyner suggests, "in some way parallel . . . the first reformation by Moses." He finds in these *-yahu* names a reflection of "the act of general reformation inaugurated by King Josiah (Yoshiahu) (2 Kings 22:23)." (P. 29.)

It is another interesting coincidence that a Book of Mormon king, 450 years after Lehi, undertook a general reformation of the national constitution and revival of the religious life of the people. He and his brothers had been stringently trained by their father, King Benjamin, "in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding," familiar with the writings of the ancient prophets and also "concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass," without which records, he tells them, "even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief." He urges, "And now my sons, I would that ye should remember to search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby." (Mosiah 1:2-3, 5, 7.)

Fittingly, this king names his eldest son, the great reforming king, Mosiah, suggesting both the early reform of Moses and its later imitation by Josiah. This would be altogether too much of a coincidence were it not that the book of Mosiah fully accounts for the resemblances when it explains just how Nephite names and customs were preserved intact in the transplanting of

have enjoyed the same preference at Jerusalem. As with Yaush at Lachish, the archives were housed at Laban's official residence, making him a top candidate for a counselor to the king.

The story of negotiating for the brass plates—the bribery, the threats of violence and attempts at violence, Nephi's successful encounter with the drunk Laban and his deception of Laban's servant to gain access to the treasury and archives—reveals a world of secret emergency sessions, tension, danger, and intrigue. The situation matches that in Lachish Letter 18, which must be "forwarded from Yaush to the King through the village of Qiryat Ye'arim by night." (P. 183.)

Lehi's sons take Laban's servant with them, "that the Jews might not know concerning our flight . . . lest they should pursue us and destroy us." (1 Ne. 4:35.) Even so we see in the Lachish Letters "a prophet fleeing from his home and friends, a prophet wanted by the military authorities." (P. 64.) The military correspondence of the Lachish Letters with its grim suspicions of disloyalty and double-dealing, fervid denials, charges, investigations, and reports reminds one of the much later Bar Kochba letters discovered in 1966, which in turn present truly astonishing parallels to some of the military correspondence in the Book of Mormon.

One peculiar situation in the Lachish letters casts a good deal of light on an equally peculiar and highly significant episode in the Book of Mormon. Torczyner suggests that "the prophet's warning letter . . . could have been sent while the prophet was still near his home town, through a little boy, most suited as an unsuspected messenger." He remarks that little boys performed such offices in the time of David (2 Sam. 15:36; 17:17-21) and that "such small boys are used also today in Palestine, often for quite

responsible missions" (p. 68).

What suggests the idea to Torczyner is the mention of one "Nedabياهو the NKD of the king" who delivered a letter from the prophet to one SHLM warning him of the danger he was in. (Letter 3:19-21.) The king's own grandson bore letters for the prophet? There is a Nedabiah, grandson of King Jehoiakim in 1 Chronicles 3:18, and Torczyner finds it "possible and even probable" that he is the very one named here. The exact meaning of NKD is "unfortunately . . . not definitely established," so that the king referred to may be "either Jehoiakim . . . or, less likely, Jeconiah, or Zedekiah." (P. 61.) It is not a direct line of descent, Jeconiah being not the father but the nephew of Zedekiah; but since most scholars maintain that NKD simply means offspring or descendant, "it would be quite possible . . . to call somebody the 'grandson' [NKD] of his grandfather's brother," in this case of Zedekiah. The Hebrew *nege'ul* may certainly be used at least for *grandnephew* as well as for *grandson*." (By an interesting coincidence the Septuagint translates the word NKD by which Nedabياهو is designated in Hebrew simply as "seed" (p. 61), as apparently does the Book of Mormon: "the seed of Zedekiah.")

This Nedabiah, whose title "may equally well mean the grandson of Jehoiakim as the grandnephew of Zedekiah," was quite young, "one would prefer the age of 10-13 to that of 5 years" (p. 69), carrying dangerous letters between the towns and camps for the prophet's people. Since he was carrying letters of warning to people ready to decamp to save their lives at a moment's notice, he could surely count on escaping with them. When news reached them that the royal family would be wiped out, only one course of survival was open to the child

and his friends.

Torczyner suggests "the date of 590-588," for this episode. According to the Book of Mormon, eleven years after Lehi left Jerusalem—in 589—a company escaped from the land of Jerusalem bearing with them the youngest son of Zedekiah, the only member of the family not put to death when Jerusalem was taken. From the descendants of these people in the New World the Nephites learned that Jerusalem actually did fall as prophesied:

"Will you dispute that Jerusalem was destroyed? Will ye say that the sons of Zedekiah were not slain all except it were Mulek? Yea, and do ye not behold that the *seed* of Zedekiah are with us, and that *they* were driven out of the land of Jerusalem?" (Hel. 8:21; italics added.)

Nowhere are we told that Mulek was the leader of the company, and indeed in his apparent youth that would be unlikely. But as the sole survivor of the royal family and heir presumptive to the throne, he was certainly the most important person in the company, a source of legitimate pride to the group. The name tells everything. *Mulek* is not found anywhere in the Bible, but any student of Semitic languages will instantly recognize it as a diminutive, a term of affection and endearment, meaning "little king." What could they call the uncrowned child, last of his line: but their little king? And what could they call themselves but Mulekiah or Mulekites? □

Hugh Nibley is professor emeritus of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

1. H. Torczyner, *The Lachish Letters: Lachis I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938). Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical page numbers throughout this article refer to this source.

2. A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 583).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 581-82.