

CHAPTER XV

Was Jesus Born in the "Land of Jerusalem?"

More often than not, the Nephite writers refer to the locality from whence their fathers came as the "land of Jerusalem." As a matter of fact, the phrase occurs upwards of forty-two times in the Book of Mormon. But never do its writers say that they came originally "from Jerusalem in the land of Judah." That they were aware of Judah is made clear in such expressions as "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah" (1 Nephi 1:4), or "even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah." (1 Nephi 5: 12.) Their references to Judah occur mostly, however, in the quotations they make from the prophecies of Isaiah. The Nephite people in later times even named one of their cities "Judea." (See Alma 56:9, 15, 18, 57; 57:11.)

Criticism of the Nephite custom of speaking of the "land of Jerusalem", is generally directed toward one verse, Alma 7:10:

And behold, he [Christ] shall be born of Mary, at *Jerusalem* which is *the land of our forefathers*. . . (Italics mine.)

"Everyone knows," say the critics, "that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, not in the 'land of Jerusalem' as implied by the Book of Mormon. In this case, as in many others, Joseph Smith betrays himself as an impostor."

It is my intention in this chapter to show that the Nephite use of the phrase "land of Jerusalem" was perfectly normal usage in ancient times. That is to say, an important city X in Palestine would be called the "land of X," an expression which referred to the city in question and the

adjacent territory under its control. When, therefore, the Nephites said that the Son of God would be born "at Jerusalem . . . the land of our forefathers," they did not necessarily mean that Jesus would be born in the city of Jerusalem proper. He could have been born in territory adjacent to Jerusalem but under its control. In this case part of the territory adjacent was the little town or village of Bethlehem, only five miles from Jerusalem.

Modern archaeological finds give us beautiful examples of the usage just described. In *The Biblical Archaeologist* issued February, 1957 (Vol. XX, No. 1), Professor Walter Harrelson, then at the University of Chicago, wrote an article entitled "Schechem in Extra-Biblical References." It was one of three articles on the Biblical city of Shechem appearing in the issue in question. In the early part of his article, Professor Harrelson calls attention to an Egyptian text of the Twelfth Dynasty which apparently refers to the city of Schechem. This Khu-Sebek inscription, as it is called, is dated about 1880-1840 B. C. Professor Harrelson says:

It would appear that Sekmem was a term used in the Khu-Sebek inscription to refer to the central Palestine area where, perhaps, opposition to the Pharaoh had its center at Schechem. Even this much is by no means certain. It could be that the country of Sekmem meant no more than the region dominated by the influence of the city of Schechem; or, at the most, that a regional confederation of city-states, with its center at Schechem, provided the major opposition to the forces of the Pharaoh.¹

Note Professor Harrelson's suggestions that Sekmem was a "region dominated by the influence of the city of Schechem" or "a regional confederation of city-states, with its center at Shechem."

It is in Harrelson's references to the Tell el-Amarna letters, however, that we find the best proof of the custom

that is the center of our interest. The cuneiform tablets known as the Amarna tablets were an exciting find by a Bedouin woman and others in the topsoil among old ruins located about 190 miles along the Nile south of Cairo, Egypt. The discovery, made in 1887, includes many letters constituting a part of the diplomatic correspondence of the Egyptian kings Amenophis III and Amenophis IV (Akhenaten) with vassals in Palestine and Syria (dates about 1406 to 1351 B.C.). One of the Amarna letters contains a reference to the Palestinian city of Shechem to which reference has already been made. Of this reference Professor Harrelson writes:

While the Tell el-Amarna letters contain only a single reference to Shechem, their importance for the history of the city extends much beyond this reference. The city is referred to in letter 289. 'Abdu-kheba, prince of Jerusalem, writes to the Pharaoh (probably Akh-en-aton) for aid to withstand the enemies who are attacking the land of the Pharaoh. If such aid does not come quickly, 'Abdu-kheba is doomed. In this context, 'Abdu-kheba raises the question: "Or should we do like Lab'ayu who gave the *land of Shechem* to the 'Apiru?" Thus we have the name of Shechem and also the name of the prince of the city. "*The land of Shechem*" must be taken to refer to the city and the adjacent territory under its control.²

From the Amarna letters, Harrelson points out that four facts, among others, are clear. The one in which we are especially interested is this:

Shechem includes sufficient territory adjacent to it to be referred to as the *land of Shechem*.³

Our point is clear. Just as the city of Shechem can be referred to as the *land of Shechem*, including territory adjacent to the city proper, so can Jerusalem, important capital city in Judah, be called in like manner the *land of Jerusalem*. The Nephites were justified by long custom in

speaking of Jerusalem as the *land of Jerusalem*. And Bethlehem, the place of our Lord's birth, was indeed part of the *land of Jerusalem*.

It has been my desire to let someone outside of the Church point out the ancient usage. Professor Harrelson has done that in his article on Shechem. It could just as easily be pointed out that the Amarna letters also refer to "the land of Gazri" and "the land of Asqaluna." (Letter 287, line 14) Gazri and Asqaluna we would recognize in English translation as Gezer and Ashkelon, the names of Biblical cities in southwestern Palestine.

Now let us come more directly to the point and show that Jerusalem was on occasion called the "land of Jerusalem." In a letter of Abdi-Hiba of Jerusalem to the king of Egypt, he says:

Verily, this land of Jerusalem [Urusalim], neither my father nor my mother has given it to me; . . . (Letter 287, lines 25-27)

The first part of the cuneiform, [a]-mur mat al 'Urusalim, could more literally be translated as "Verily, the land of the city of Jerusalem." In lines 45 and 46 of the same letter we find the following:

Pauru, the deputy of the king, departs for the land of Jerusalem.

Again, in lines 60-63 notice these references to Jerusalem:

Verily, the king has set his name upon the land of Jerusalem forever.
Therefore he cannot abandon the lands of Jerusalem.

Notice matat at'Uru-sa-limki "the lands of Jerusalem."

In another letter to the king (No. 289), Abdi-Hiba complains about enemies who are seeking to capture Jerusalem, and then says:

If this land belongs to the king, how is it that Hazati [Gaze] is at the king's disposal?

Perhaps the letter in the Amarna series which best sets forth the points we are proving in this chapter is Abdi-Hiba's sixth letter to the king (Amarna No. 290, lines 1217)

The land of the king has fallen away to the Habiru; and now in addition to that a city of the land of Jerusalem, whose name is Bit-Ninib, a city of the king . . .

The translations of the Amarna letters given immediately above have been deliberately chosen from Professor S. A. B. Mercer's edition of them.⁴ He was the gentleman who, years ago, assisted the Rt. Reverend F. S. Spalding, Episcopal Bishop of Utah, in making a frontal attack on the scripture we know as the Book of Abraham. Incidentally, Mercer points out that at least one scholar (Schroeder) equates Bit-Ninib (see last letter above) with Bethlehem,⁵ the place of our Savior's birth. If this is true, Bethlehem was a city in the "land of Jerusalem." However, to keep the record straight, it is only fair to state that scholars are not agreed on the identification of Bit-Ninib. But the point we have tried to establish is borne out, whether Bit-Ninib is identified as Bethlehem or as some other town.

Finally, let us see how a world-famous German historian accepts the type of evidence we have presented. Professor Martin Noth of Bonn University says:

At that time [the Amarna age] Bethlehem which was 8 kilometres away on this side was 'a city of the land of Jerusalem,' i.e. a place subject to the rule of Jerusalem.⁶

The evidence cited above seems to us to prove rather conclusively that Book of Mormon writers were not out of bounds when they affirmed that the Son of God would "be born . . . at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers."

NOTES:

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.
2. *Op, cit.* p. 6. Italics ours.
3. *Op. cit.* p. 7. Italics are Harrelson's.
4. The Amarna letters have been published by two editors. The first, and in certain respects the better edition, was J. A. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna Tafeln* (Leipzig, 1915), 2 Vols. Mercer's, *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto, 1939), 2 Vols., has the advantage of being more complete and being in English. My colleague, Dr. Hugh Nibley, used Abdi-Hiba's sixth letter (see above) in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Melchizedek Priesthood Manual), 1957. See pp. 85-86. He translated from Knudtzon's edition, II, 876-877. Attention should also be called to Dr. Ariel L. Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon*, Chap. XII, 1961.
5. *Op. cit.*, II, 722, footnote.
6. *The History of Israel*, p. 32. Harper and Brothers, New York, 1958. By permission.