



Type: Magazine Article

Lehi in the Desert, Part VII

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 53, No. 7 (July 1950), pp. 566–567, 587–588

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

LEHI IN THE DESERT

Part VII

IBN QUTAIBA, in a famous work on poetry, quoted a great desert poet, Abu Sakhr, as saying that nothing on earth brings verses so readily to mind as the sight of running water and wild places.²⁶¹ This applies not only to springs, of course, but to all running water. Thomas recounts how his Arabs upon reaching the Umm al-Hait hailed it with a song in praise of "the continuous and flowing rain," whose bounty filled the bed of the *wady*, "flowing along between sand and stream course. . . ." ²⁶² Just so Lehi holds up as the most admirable of examples "this river, continually running . . ."; for to the people of the desert there is no more miraculous and lovely thing on earth than continually running water. In the most stirring episode of Saint-Exupery's *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, the Arab chiefs who view the wonders of Paris with cool indifference burst into cries of devout rapture at the sight of a torrent in the Alps.²⁶³ When the Beni Hilal stopped at their first oasis, the beauty of it and the green vegetation reminded them again of the homeland they had left, "and they wept greatly remembering it."²⁶⁴ It was because Laman and Lemuel were loud in lamenting the loss of their pleasant "land of Jerusalem . . . and their precious things" (I Nephi 2:11) that their father was moved to address them on this occasion.

If the earliest desert poems were songs inspired by the fair sight of running water, no one today knows the *form* they took. That can only be conjectured from the earliest known form of Semitic verse. This is the *saj'*, a short exhortation or injunction spoken with such solemnity and fervor as to fall into a sort of chant. Examples would be magical incantations, curses, and the formal pronouncements of teachers, priests, and judges.²⁶⁵ From the earliest times the *saj'* was the form in which inspiration and revelation announced themselves.²⁶⁶ Though

the speaker of the *saj'* did not aim consciously at metrical form, his words were necessarily more than mere prose, and were received by their hearers as poetry. The *saj'* had the effect of overawing the hearer completely and was considered absolutely binding on the person to whom it was addressed,²⁶⁷ its aim being to compel action.²⁶⁸

Lehi's words to his sons take just this form of short, solemn, rhythmic appeal. The fact that the speech to Laman exactly matches that to his brother shows that we have here such a formal utterance as the *saj'*. The proudest boast of the desert poet is, "I utter a verse and after it its brother," for the consummation of the poetic art was to have two verses perfectly parallel in form and content; few ever achieved this, the usual verse being followed at best by a "cousin" and not a brother.²⁶⁹ Yet Lehi seems to have carried it off. Of the moral fervor and didactic intent of his recitation there can be no doubt; the fact that Nephi recounts the episode in a record in which there is, as he says, only room for great essentials, shows what a deep impression it made upon him.

In addressing his sons in what looks like a little song, Lehi is doing just what Isaiah does when he speaks to Israel in a *shirat dodi*, "a friendly chant," a popular song about a vine which, once the hearer's attention has been won, turns into a very serious moral tirade.²⁷⁰ On another occasion, as we have noted, he employs the popular figure of the olive tree. The stock opening line of the old desert poems is, "O my two friends!" an introduction which, says Ibn Qutaiba, should be avoided, "since only the ancients knew how to use it properly, uniting a gentle and natural manner with the grandiose and magnificent."²⁷¹ Lehi's poem is an example of this: he addresses

his two sons separately but with the vocative O! and describes the river and valley in terms of unsurpassed brevity and simplicity and in the vague and sweeping manner of the real desert poets, of whom Burton says, "there is a dreaminess of idea and a haze thrown over the object, infinitely attractive, but indescribable."²⁷²

According to Richter, the best possible example of the primitive Arabic *qasid* is furnished by those old poems in which one's beloved is compared to a land "in which abundant streams flow down . . . with rushing and swirling, so that the water overflows every evening, continually."²⁷³ Here the "continually flowing" water is compared to the person addressed, as in Lehi's "song" to Laman. The original *qasid*, the same authority avers, was built around the beseeching (*werbenden*, hence the name *qasid*) motif, not necessarily erotic in origin, as some think, but dealing with praise of virtue (*Tugendlob*) in general.²⁷⁴ Ibn Qutaiba even claims that the introductory love theme was merely a device to gain the attention of male listeners and was not at all the real stuff of the poem.²⁷⁵ The standard pattern is a simple one: (a) the poet's attention is arrested by some impressive natural phenomenon, usually running water; (b) this leads him to recite a few words in its praise, drawing it to the attention of a beloved companion; and (c) making it an object lesson for the latter, who is urged to be like it. Burton gives a good example: at the sight of the Wady al-Akik the nomad poet is moved to exclaim,

O my friend, this is Akik, then stand by it. Endeavoring to be distracted by love, if not really a lover.

This seems to be some sort of love song, albeit a peculiar one, and some

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In modern Palestine precious water is lifted from ancient wells by this picturesque "donkey-power pump," a strongly built wooden wheel which operates an endless chain of clay buckets.

—Photograph by Adelbert Bartlett



have claimed that all the old *qasids* were simply love songs.²⁷⁶ But Burton and his Arabs know the real meaning, "the esoteric meaning of this couplet," which quite escapes us:

Man! This is a lovely portion of God's creation:

Then stand by it, and here learn to love the perfections of thy Supreme Friend.²⁷⁷

Compare this with Lehi's appeal to Lemuel:

O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast,
And immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!

Note the remarkable parallel: in each case the poet, a wanderer in the desert, is moved by the sight of a pleasant valley; he calls the attention of his beloved companion to the view, and appeals to his

friend to learn a lesson from the valley and "stand by it," firm and unshakable in the love of the ways of the Lord. Let us list briefly the exacting conditions fulfilled by Nephi's account of his father's *qasids*, conditions fulfilled likewise by the earliest known desert poems.

(1) They are *Brunnen* — or *Quellenlieder*, as the Germans call them, that is, songs inspired by the sight of water gushing from a spring or running down a valley.

(2) They are addressed to one or (usually) two traveling companions.

(3) They praise the beauty and the excellence of the scene, calling it to the attention of the hearer as an object lesson.

(4) The hearer is urged to be like the thing he beholds.²⁷⁸

(5) The poems are recited extempore on the spot and with great feeling.

(6) They are very short, and one verse should be followed by its "brother," making a perfectly matched pair.²⁷⁹

Here we have beyond any doubt all the elements of a situation of which no westerner in 1830 could have had the remotest conception. Nephi has described the very situation in which the great men of the desert were once long ago wont to speak the words that made their names immortal among the nomads and scholars of a later generation. And the words they uttered were, to the best of our knowledge, of exactly the same cast and content as those spoken by Lehi, who now stands before us as something of a poet, as well as a great prophet and leader. This is a reminder that in the world in which Lehi was moving, those three offices *had* to go together.

It has often been said that there is no real poetry in the Book of Mormon—no real English poetry, that is. By the same token there is no real Danish or Russian poetry. The explanation of this grave defect is a simple one: If there were any good poetry in the book, it would give just cause for suspicion, for Burton, even while praising the matchless genius of the desert poets, is careful to point out that they are utterly "destitute of the poetic taste, as we define it." (Italics author's.)²⁸⁰ To Lehi's "literary" critics we need only reply that its authors were never supposed to have composed in English or Danish or Russian. The same literary critics may affirm with equal confidence that there is no good literature in Mutanabbi or the Kitab-al-Aghani, not one of whose vast store of poems has ever been done into great or even good English verse. Yet those who know these books best insist that they represent the high point not only in Arabic but in all poetry.

As if to prove that no westerner could possibly have dreamed up Nephi's account, we are challenged by the remarkable expression, "like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable. . . ." Who west of Suez would ever think of such an image? At the very least the proof-reader should have caught such a howler, which should certainly have been corrected in subsequent editions; for we, of course, know

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cemetery about half way from east to west. It is reached by following the path into the cemetery and then going to the south line. The original headstone is still in place.

Palmyra, key point in this month's area, is twenty-three miles southeast of Rochester and is reached by highway thirty-one. It is sixty-five miles west of Syracuse and can be reached by taking highway 21 to Palmyra via Manchester Village and Hill Cumorah. Approaching Palmyra from the south, from the New York City area, a favorable route is highway 17 to Owego, then highway 96 to Manchester, and highway 21 to Palmyra, via Hill Cumorah which is four miles south of Palmyra.

From eastern New York points, highway 31 direct or highways 20 or 5 to Canandaigua, then north on highway 21, lead to Palmyra. Farther north highway 104, the "Ridge Route," can be followed to Williamson where highway 21 intersects it and follows southerly to Palmyra.

By bus, excellent service to Palmyra is maintained from Rochester, twenty-three miles northwest, and from Syracuse, sixty-five miles east,

and intermediate points including Lyons, the county seat of Wayne County, fifteen miles, and Newark (N.Y.), nine miles. There is no regular bus service from Canandaigua to Palmyra.

By air the most satisfactory approach is from Rochester where excellent air service is maintained by American Airlines on one of its principal routes. The same service is available approaching from Syracuse, but the distance to Palmyra is much greater.

Next month the Auburn, New York area, where Brigham Young spent his young manhood, became an expert carpenter and builder, married, and set himself up in business, will be discussed.

Note: When names of railroads, airlines, or bus lines are given, it should not be implied that there is any connection or arrangement with such concerns. This service is entirely independent and gives the best information available without influence from any outside source.

Persons traveling from the New York area to Palmyra can visit the Peter Whitmer home in the Town of Fayette, Seneca County, New York, by turning west three miles south of Waterloo and going one mile west. A sign on the left (going north) indicates the intersection.

SCOUTING FOR 11-YEAR-OLD BOYS

(Concluded from page 565)

National and regional scouters, when they have had carefully explained to them the new program for eleven-year-olds in the Church, have been very enthusiastic about it. They see in the plan, as we do, the possibility of getting our youth out into the open in a planned program that will do more than anything else to teach them the ideals of scouting, which are the ideals of the Church.

President George Albert Smith, prophet, seer, and revelator, and ranking scouter of the Church, ex-

presses his feelings and ours, as well as the policy of the M.I.A. and the Church, in the following words:

After many years of close contact with scouting through national and local leaders, and with many Scouts of various faiths, I am convinced that participation in this splendid program is one of the most worth-while experiences our boys can have.

The ideals of scouting, like the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, are intended to make boys better companions, more useful citizens, and happier individuals.

It is my desire to see scouting extended to every boy in the Church where that is at all possible.

LEHI IN THE DESERT

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all about everlasting hills, but who ever heard of a steadfast valley? The Arabs, to be sure. For them the valley, and not the mountain, is the symbol of permanence. It is not the mountain of refuge to which they flee, but the valley of refuge.

The great depressions that run for hundreds of miles across the Arabian peninsula pass for the most part through plains devoid of mountains.²⁸¹ It is in these prehistoric riverbeds alone that water, vegetation, and animal life are to be found,

(Continued on following page)



How many salutes does a governor rate?

What was the largest baby ever born?



When do goldfish spawn?

When was the Liberty Bell in Utah?



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Lehi in the Desert

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when all else is desolation.²⁵² They offer the Arab the only chance of escaping detection from his enemies and death from hunger and thirst. The qualities of firmness and steadfastness, of reliable protection and sure refuge when all else fails, which other nations attribute naturally to mountains, the Arabs attribute to valleys.²⁵³

(To be continued)

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²⁰¹Ibn Qotaiba, *Introduction au Livre de la Poesie et des Poetes, Muqaddamatu Kitabi sh-Shi're wa sh-Shu'ara* (ed. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, Paris, 1947) Pt. 15

²⁰²*Arabia Felix*, p. 153

²⁰³Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *Wind, Sand, and Stars* (N.Y., Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939)

²⁰⁴*Kitab Taghriba Bani Hilal* (Pub. Moh. Hashim in Syria) p. 54

²⁰⁵Goldziher, *op. cit.*, I, 67-69. Brockelmann and Jacob say the same

²⁰⁶*Id.* 70f

²⁰⁷*Id.* p. 59

²⁰⁸*Id.* pp. 72-75

²⁰⁹Ibn Qotaiba, *op. cit.*, Pt. 23; Goldziher, p. 74: the saj' was very repetitious in form

²⁷⁰Isaiah V. 1-7; P. Cersoy, "L'Apologue de la Vigne," *Rev. Biblique* 8 (1899), 40-47

²⁷¹Ibn Qotaiba, *op. cit.*, p. 54f, n. 70

²⁷²"I cannot well explain the effect of Arab poetry, on one who has not visited the Desert. Apart from the pomp of words, and the music of the sound, there is a dreaminess of idea, etc." *Pilg. to Al-Madinah* II, 99. Lehi's language is of this simple, noble, but hazy kind.

²⁷³Gust. Richter, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der altarabischen Qaside," *Deutsche Morgenländische Ges. Ztschr.* 92 (1939), p. 557f. The passage cited is from 'Antar.

²⁷⁴*Id.* pp. 563-5

²⁷⁵Ibn Qotaiba, *op. cit.*, Sect. 12

²⁷⁶C. Brockelmann, *Gesch. der Arabischen Litteratur* (Weimar, 1898) I, 16

²⁷⁷Burton, *Pilg. to Al-Madinah*, etc., I, 278, n. 3

²⁷⁸Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 558

²⁷⁹Even the greatest Arabic poems consist of disconnected couplets, each a complete poem in itself and having no connection with the other lines; it was even thought bad taste to deviate from this rule, according to Brockelmann, *Gesch. der arab. Lit.* (Leipzig, 1909), p. 12

²⁸⁰Burton, *op. cit.*, II, 298

²⁸¹" . . . from the plain this gorge is hardly suspected. . . ." Woolley & Lawrence, *Wilderness of Zin*, p. 137, speaking of a particularly impressive valley.

²⁸²See above, note

²⁸³Thus Zohair, in *Mu'alliqat* III, 13: "And when they went down to the water, blue and still in its depression, they laid down their walking-sticks like one who has reached a permanent resting-place."

"Modern Missionary Campaign"

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