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Was Lehi a Caravaneer?

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And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness. And it came to pass that he was obedient unto the word of the Lord, wherefore he did as the Lord commanded him. And it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness. And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 2:2-4)

Hugh Nibley has contributed perhaps more than any other single scholar to our understanding of the historical and cultural background of the Book of Mormon, especially in its Old World origins.² With regard to Lehi, whose departure from Jerusalem led to the colonization of the New World by Israelites, Nibley has shown a large number of cultural ties to the Near East of circa 600 BC.

¹ This article was issued as a FARMS preliminary report in 1984. It is published here for the first time.

² Of particular note are three of his books, *Lehi in the Desert* (originally published by Bookcraft in 1952), *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (originally published by the LDS Church in 1957, with the second edition published by Deseret in 1964), and *Since Cumorah* (originally published by Deseret in 1967). All of these have since been reissued in new editions: *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret, 1988); *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret, 1988); *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: FARMS and Deseret, 1988).

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The question of Lehi's profession before he left Jerusalem, however, is one subject Nibley explores that may, in fact, profit from some reexamination in light of more recent research. His thoughts on Lehi's profession are found in two of his books and read as follows:

There is ample evidence in the Book of Mormon that Lehi was an expert on caravan travel, as one might expect. Consider a few general points. Upon receiving a warning dream, he is ready apparently at a moment's notice to take his whole 'family, and provisions, and tents' out into the wilderness. While he took absolutely nothing but the most necessary provisions with him (1 Nephi 2:4), he knew exactly what those provisions should be, and when he had to send back to the city to supply unanticipated wants, it was for records that he sent and not for any necessities for the journey. This argues a high degree of preparation and knowledge in the man, as does the masterly way in which he established a base camp.³

Other facts cited as evidence that Lehi was a caravaner will be noted below. We will examine all this evidence and explore some other possible explanations, then propose alternative professions in which Lehi might have worked that now appear more consistent with the record we have. At the outset, let us begin with the Book of Mormon passage cited by Nibley above, 1 Nephi 2:4:

And it came to pass that he [Lehi] departed into the wilderness. And he left his house, and the

³ Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 77; *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, 36.

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land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness.

There are indications in this passage that Lehi was not prepared for a sudden journey into the wilderness. While most things are labeled (in true Hebraic style) “his . . . and his . . . ,” (“his gold, and his silver, and his precious things”) the pronoun’s absence is striking when it comes to “provisions and tents,” which are the very things one would expect a caravaner to have on hand. Because the rest of the verse is so consistent in using the possessive pronoun, its absence here may mean that Lehi had to procure provisions and tents for the trip. If so, this would imply that he was not involved in the caravan trade.

If Lehi recorded all of the details of his trip into the desert, they do not appear to be included in the record on the small plates of Nephi from which Joseph Smith translated the account in 1 Nephi. For example, Nibley points out that Lehi probably had camels as pack animals, though these are not mentioned in the text.⁴ If this detail is omitted, it is possible that others, such as the purchase of tents and supplies, are also missing from the record we now have.⁵

⁴ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert* 54-58.

⁵ In a private communication on March 22, 1984, Lisa Hawkins commented as follows on an early draft of this chapter: “Wouldn’t Lehi’s purchase of those kinds of tents etc. have called attention to his plans to escape? Could that be a problem—would someone have tried to prevent them?” This would perhaps be true had Lehi tried to make such a purchase in Jerusalem. But it seems unlikely that Judah’s capital city had a local tent shop. It is more plausible to suggest that tents would have to be purchased from those who manufactured and used them, such as a nomadic family living out in the steppe. Such people, assuming them to be like the Bedouin of today, would have taken very little interest in the political machinations of their sedentary neighbors (and perhaps a high interest in whatever Lehi might pay them). Consequently, the possibility of his plans being disclosed by those who sold him the tents is remote.

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The apparent swiftness with which Lehi left Jerusalem is cited as one of the strongest reasons for the idea that he was a caravaner.⁶ But the Book of Mormon does not specify how long it took him to prepare for his journey. Since the record is an abridgment, one cannot assume that Lehi left Jerusalem on a moment's notice simply because the passage omits details about his preparations.

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The fact that Lehi is said to have known the Egyptian "language" (Mosiah 1:4) has been used to bolster the possibility that Lehi was a traveling merchant.⁷ Nibley even suggests that the Book of Mormon plates were written in the Egyptian language,⁸ but recent evidence suggests that the language of the Nephites was Hebrew, which they symbolized in writing by making use of Egyptian signs.⁹ This was also the view of Sidney B. Sperry.¹⁰

⁶ Besides Nibley, see S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 69, note 16.

⁷ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 11-12; *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 47.

⁸ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 13-19.

⁹ There are several different views found among Book of Mormon scholars concerning the nature of the Nephite language, both spoken and written. As indicated in Chapter 2, I have opted for the proposition that the Nephites spoke Hebrew and wrote Hebrew using a writing system partially derived from the Egyptian written language. For further study of this view, see John A. Tvedtnes "Linguistic Implications of the Tel Arad Ostraca," *Newsletter & Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* No. 127 (October 1971); John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (eds.), *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret & FARMS, 1991).

¹⁰ Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1950), Chapter 3.

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The use of Egyptian symbols to transliterate Hebrew words and vice versa, is known from sixth century B.C. texts discovered at Arad and Kadesh-Barnea.¹¹ The fact that these texts were used by local people shows that one did not have to be a traveling merchant in order to have some background in the Egyptian writing system and to use it as Lehi did. Indeed, the fact that Egyptian symbols are used as the sole representation of numerals in ninth- through sixth-century B.C. Hebrew texts from various locations is an indication of the fact that even non-travelers picked up information from the caravaneers and used it locally.¹²

Nibley suggested, "Lehi's main business was with Egypt, carried on both by land and sea."¹³ If this were so, however, Nephi, following Near Eastern custom, should have been engaged in the same profession as his father, and hence should have been acquainted with ships. So unacquainted was he, however, that his brothers mocked not only his project to construct a seagoing vessel, but his ability to sail it (1 Nephi 17:17).

A millennium before Lehi, the text of Ipuwer states that all foreigners knew the language of Egypt.¹⁴ But this was not because all foreigners traveled to Egypt as merchants, but, more likely, because Egyptian merchants traveled far and wide. Thus, in Lehi's day, nearly a thousand years later, it was most likely that he picked up a knowledge of Egyptian without ever leaving home.

Another point mentioned by Nibley to show that Lehi was involved in foreign trade is that the name of the Phoenician

¹¹ For a discussion and bibliography, see John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2, Fall 1996.

¹² These weight numerals used in ancient Israel have been demonstrated to be of Egyptian origin. See the bibliography in my "Linguistic Implications of the Arad Ostraca."

¹³ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86; *Lehi in the Desert*, 13.

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port-city of Sidon appears in the Book of Mormon in both its Egyptian and Hebrew forms.¹⁵ While the fact itself may be significant, we must not omit the possibility that it was the Mulekites and not the Nephites who brought the name to the New World.¹⁶ Indeed, some LDS scholars have theorized that the Mulek colony came across the ocean in Phoenician ships.¹⁷

BEDOUIN LIFESTYLE

Many aspects of Lehi's sojourn in the wilderness are noted as possible evidence of his caravaner experience. But the facts that have been cited are not necessarily evidence that Lehi was used to a nomadic lifestyle. Rather, they may simply be examples of his trust in the Lord.¹⁸

¹⁵ The name of the river Sidon does not appear in the Book of Mormon until after the Nephites and Mulekites merged under the first Mosiah. The river was situated in former Mulekite territory, not in the lands first settled by the Nephites or Lamanites.

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¹⁷ See, for example, Ross T. Christensen, "The Phoenicians and the Ancient Civilizations of America," *Newsletter & Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 111 (January 13, 1969); Ross T. Christensen, "Did the Phoenicians Cross the Atlantic?" *Newsletter & Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 118 (January 12, 1970); Ross T. & Ruth R. Christensen, "Perspective on the Route of Mulek's Colony," *Newsletter & Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 131 (September 1972); Bernhart Johnson, "Israelite-Phoenician Commercial Relations & the Voyage of Mulek to the New World," *Newsletter & Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 140 (March 1977).

¹⁸ Nibley is correct in saying that the word "wilderness" in 1 Nephi 8:4, 7 is desert and not jungle (*Lehi in the Desert*, 50). But it is not certain that the word "wilderness" in the Book of Mormon means "desert most of the time" (*Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 135-7). In 1 Nephi 18:26 (and apparently in Alma 58:13-14,

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For example, Nibley suggests that the Israelites typically maintained ties to the desert—and specifically to a nomadic way of life. But further study has indicated that this cannot be fully substantiated. Idioms such as “to your tents, O Israel” (2 Samuel 20:1; 1 Kings 12:16; 2 Chronicles 10:16) may be nothing more than that—just idiomatic, based on a reality that no longer existed in the Iron Age.

One item of evidence used to tie Israelites to the nomadic life is the example of Jonadab ben Rekhab, mistakenly said by Nibley to have been a contemporary of Lehi. His family left Jerusalem to take up a nomadic lifestyle.¹⁹ But this man is named in 2 Kings 10:15 and lived in the ninth century BC, more than two centuries before Lehi’s time.²⁰ There is no indication that Jonadab previously lived in Jerusalem. Indeed, Jeremiah 35 indicates that it was in Lehi’s day that the Rechabites, Jonadab’s descendants, first came to Jerusalem, probably because of the press of the Babylonian army then invading the land.²¹

In reference to 1 Nephi 2:15, Nibley wrote, “To an Arab, ‘my father dwelt in a tent’ says everything.”²² But to have said, “we

19-20), the word obviously refers to “forest.” This may have been a transference of meaning based on the fact that both the forest encountered in the New World and the desert in the Old were relatively uninhabited. (Along similar lines, we find that the word meaning “horse” in some of the Yuman Indian languages is the native word for “deer,” which was applied to the animal later introduced into the area.) Thus, most serious Book of Mormon scholars believe that the word “wilderness,” as applied by the Book of Mormon to regions in the New World, refers to forest land.

¹⁹ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 68.

²⁰ This is based on a rather detailed book-length study on the Kenites, of whom the Rechabites are a part. As yet unpublished, it is entitled: John A. Tvedtnes, “The House of Jethro: A History of the Kenites.”

²¹ The Rechabites, descendants of Jethro via Rechab, Jonadab’s ancestor, became priests in the temple in Jerusalem.

²² Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 51.

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had camels for pack animals” would have said the same thing, yet Nephi never mentions this fact, as Nibley points out. Why, then, did Nephi mention the tents?

There are a number of references to the tents of Lehi and his party (1 Nephi 2:15; 3:1; 4:38; 5:7; 7:5, 21-22; 15:1; 16:32.). After recounting his explanation of the tree of life vision to his brethren, Nephi wrote, “Now, all these things were said and done as my father dwelt in a tent in the valley which he called Lemuel” (1 Nephi 16:6). This statement may imply the extraordinary circumstances under which Lehi and his family were living. In fact, “My father dwelt in a tent” may have been an indication that this was not normal! It could have been a striking and an unusual fact, a new life style for a man whose background was sedentary, perhaps even urban.

As further proof that Lehi was at home in the desert, Nibley pointed to the absence of any references to camels in the 1 Nephi account. This may be because, as he explains, “in the East the common words for travel are camel-words.”²³ While this is true for medieval and modern Arabic, we cannot know if it is true for the Arabic of Lehi’s time, of which there are no existing records.²⁴ Most scholars today see these “camel-words” as a secondary development in Arabic, which is notable for making verbs of nouns in a deliberate attempt to make the language more complex and hence a more useful tool for the composition of a special type of poetry.

Though Lehi’s establishment of a “base camp” (1 Nephi 2:5) was described by Nibley as “masterly,” the Book of Mormon text doesn’t really have enough information in it to justify the adjective. In fact, very little is said about Lehi’s camp aside from

²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁴ There are numerous inscriptions in Epigraphic South Arabic from the Iron II period (tenth to sixth centuries B.C.), but this language, while related to Arabic, is a different branch of the Semitic language family, more closely related to Ethiopic.

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locating it in a valley beside water and noting that Lehi lived in a tent. Moreover, the “base camp” was but a temporary location and the bulk of Lehi’s time before departing for the New World (eight years) appears to have been spent in the wilderness after leaving the Valley of Lemuel.

After their arrival in the New World, Nephi’s departure from Laman and Lemuel using tents is also cited as evidence of the nomadic pattern of his family (2 Nephi 5:5-7). It is noted further that the Lamanites continued to live in tents (Enos 20).²⁵ But this pattern may have been due to their eight years of living in tents on the Arabian peninsula. Indeed, shortly after Nephi’s group separated from that of his elder brethren, the Nephites began planting crops, raising herds and constructing buildings, including a temple (2 Nephi 5:11-17)—hardly typical of a nomadic lifestyle.

Later, the Nephite pattern of settlement was to establish city-states, wherein cities would control the land surrounding them. This gave rise to the Book of Mormon practice of calling the city and the land surrounding it by the same name.²⁶ This was typical of Judah in the time of Lehi,²⁷ but not of nomadic peoples or of caravaneers. The people’s wish to make Nephi their king (2 Nephi 5:18) is also typical of sedentary populations, not of nomads.²⁸

As for the fact that the Lamanites continued to live in tents, we must remember what Nephi wrote of them. They “did

²⁵ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 141-42.

²⁶ See John A. Tvedtnes, “Cities and Lands in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2, Fall 1995.

²⁷ Nibley himself demonstrated this in *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 100-102 and *Lehi in the Desert*, 6-7.

²⁸ Nomadic peoples, because they generally travel in small groups (due to the scarcity of water and pasturage), tend not to have kings. Indeed, the chroniclers of ancient Assyria took note of the rather peculiar fact that the first seventeen Assyrian kings had lived in tents. See James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Texts, Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton Univ., 1969), 564.

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become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24).²⁹ This laziness is reflected in the story of the building of the ship, in which Laman and Lemuel complained against Nephi “and were desirous that they might not labor” (1 Nephi 17:18). Had they been industrious like Nephi and his group, they, too, would probably have built more permanent homes and settled down.

A number of the things done by Lehi and his party while traveling through the wilderness are, as Nibley has shown, typical of Middle Eastern nomadic peoples. But some of these “Bedouin traits” turn out to be poor evidence of Lehi’s traveling skills. For example, though it may be typically Bedouin to travel in the “more fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:14), as Lehi did,³⁰ we read that it was the Lord who led them into these areas by means of the mysterious “ball” or Liahona (1 Nephi 16:16). If Lehi were an experienced desert caravaner, why would he need divine assistance to locate these fertile areas?

Lehi’s restricted use of fire in the wilderness is cited as another trait of desert Arabs, whose campfires might alert nearby enemies to their presence.³¹ As a consequence of this, we read that they had to eat “raw meat in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:2). Again, however, it was the Lord who commanded them not to build fires (1 Nephi 17:12). Would this have been necessary if Lehi were already experienced in desert travel?

Some of the wording of Nephi’s hymn of praise in 2 Nephi 4 is marked as evidence that his family had desert connections. In

²⁹ That Laman and Lemuel did not suddenly “become” lazy in the New World is evidenced in earlier statements by Nephi concerning their laziness. John W. Welch, in a private communication, has suggested that the words “did become an idle people” may have reference to the establishment of a cultural pattern rather than to any personal characteristics of the Lamanites.

³⁰ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 58-59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

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verse 32, Nephi prays “that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road”— thoughts expressed (as are those in verse 33) in Arabic greetings and blessings.³² But these expressions could have resulted from the fact that Nephi spent eight years in the Arabian desert. They need not imply that he or his family had been there before. Moreover, the Bible is replete with examples of “desert speech” which became idiomatic after the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan.³³ Some of these idioms undoubtedly remained in the Hebrew of Lehi’s day. Idioms are expressions whose original meaning is often forgotten. Thus, we could also conclude that Americans have close ties to the Arabian desert, for we not only employ a large number of Arabic words in our language (including sugar, cotton, hazard, albatross, and the like), but we also say “So long” as an idiomatic equivalent of “goodbye” (itself idiomatic, from “God abide with you”). “So long” is a corruption of the Arabic greeting salâm, picked up by our Crusader ancestors.

Attributing an Arabic origin to 2 Nephi 4:32, fails to note that the prayer cited above is immediately preceded by the words, “O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me.” Gates, of course, are common to cities but not to deserts. So this verse provides just as much evidence for Nephi’s urban origins as it does for a desert habitat.

In 2 Nephi 4:33, Nephi continues his hymn by saying, “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!” Nibley suggests that this may be tied to the throwing of the desert sheikh’s robe around those seeking protection.³⁴ Again, however, the expression may simply have been

³² Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon* 74-75; *Since Cumorah*, 157.

³³ For a study of this topic, with many examples from the Bible, see Morris S. Seale, *The Desert Bible: Nomadic Tribal Culture and Old Testament Interpretation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974).

³⁴ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 75; *Since Cumorah*, 157.

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idiomatic to Lehi or its desert origins may have been obscured. In 1 Kings 19:19, we read that Elijah cast his mantle around Elisha who was, according to that text, a farmer. But the Bible stories of Elijah show that the prophet felt at home in the towns and villages of Israel.

In further support of the thesis that Lehi had ties with the desert, the names Ishmael, Lehi, Lemuel, Alma and Sam are said to be Arabic in origin.³⁵ However, in attempting to tie Lehi to Egypt, Nibley also says the name Sam is Egyptian.³⁶ Rather than tie the name Lehi to the Biblical site known as Ramat-Lehi (Judges 15:17), he has been connected with the well (Hebrew *be'ēr*) of Lehai-Ro'i.³⁷ That well plays an important role in the story of Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar, mother of Ishmael, whose descendants settled the Hijazi region of western Arabia (Genesis 16:14). But Ishmael is also the name of a member of the royal family of Judah from the time of Lehi (Jeremiah 40). The name Alma is probably more correctly to be associated with the Aramaic name Alma found in Nahal Hever, as Nibley notes.³⁸ Hence, these names give but little support to the idea that Lehi and his family had ties to Arabia prior to his flight from Jerusalem. Furthermore, Lehi gave the names Jacob and Joseph to the two sons born to him in Arabia, and these are typical Hebrew names.³⁹

With regard to the fact that Lehi named some of the sites he visited during his desert travels (see, for example, 1 Nephi 2:8; 9:1; 16:13), Nibley is certainly correct in noting that the naming of

³⁵ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 75-76; *Lehi in the Desert*, 41-42.

³⁶ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 286.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75, 290, 499 (note 25).

³⁸ Hugh Nibley, Review of Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kochba* in *BYU Studies* 14 (Autumn 1973), 120-121.

³⁹ While it is true that both names can be found among Arabs, they are borrowing from the Bible, not using native Arabic names.

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places in the desert is an Arabic feature.⁴⁰ However, we find it in the Bible in reference to more sedentary peoples as well.⁴¹ It is therefore not evidence of Lehi's prior ties with Arabia.⁴²

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The complaints and disputes that characterized life during Lehi's travels through the wilderness of Arabia (1 Nephi 2:11-13; 3:5, 28, 31; 5:2-3; 7:6-8, 16-19; 16:20-22, 35-38; 17:17-22) are cited as typical of Bedouin life, where the children frequently quarrel with their parents, including the sheikh.⁴³ However, it would be atypical of the Bedouin to go so far as to seek the life of the father and brother, as did Laman and Lemuel (1 Nephi 16:37).

Concerning the nature of these quarrels, Nibley wrote that Lehi's family complain "like all Arabs, against the terrible and dangerous deserts through which they pass, but they do not include ignorance of the desert among their hazards, though that would be their first and last objection to his wild project were Lehi nothing

⁴⁰ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 81-82; *Lehi in the Desert*, 74-79.

⁴¹ See, for example, Judges 1:26; 2:5; 6:24; 15:17, 19; 18:12, 29; 1 Samuel 23:28; 2 Samuel 5:9, 20; 6:2; 18:18; 1 Kings 9:13; 2 Kings 14:7; 1 Chronicles 11:7; 14:11.

⁴² Philby's story (recounted in *Lehi in the Desert*, 75-76) of the Arab who gave the same name to three different hills (because that was the way it was done) is not a good example of the Arabic custom of naming desert sites. When an Arab does not have an answer to a question, he tends to give a stock one or to invent something. This is because he cannot, in his culture, disappoint someone who wants an answer, so he must supply one, even if it is not true. This is a typical Arab trait. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Arab Logic" in *Languages & Linguistics Symposium, 1977* (Provo: Deseret Language & Linguistics Society and the BYU College of Humanities, in conjunction with the Language and Intercultural Research Center, 1977). Others who have discussed this trait are John Laffin, *The Arab Mind* (London: Cassell, 1975), 23, 81, 91-92, 146, 149; and Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 49-59.

⁴³ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 68-70.

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but a city Jew unacquainted with the wild and dangerous world of the waste places.”⁴⁴

Lehi’s family charged him with irresponsibility and lack of candor in leading them out into the wastes, and in view of what they had to suffer and what they left behind they were, from the common sense point of view, quite right. The decision to depart into the wilderness came suddenly to Lehi, by a dream. (1 Nephi 2:2.) In the same way “. . . the Lord commanded that I, Nephi, should return unto the land of Jerusalem, and bring down Ishmael and his family into the wilderness.” (1 Nephi 7:2)⁴⁵

It is true that Laman and Lemuel, along with the sons of Ishmael murmured “because of their sufferings and afflictions in the wilderness,” but so, too, did Lehi (1 Nephi 16:20). And we discover in another passage that Laman and Lemuel objected to the long return trip to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates because it was “a hard thing...required of them” (1 Nephi 3:5).⁴⁶ But this does not appear to be their principal complaint against their father.

Laman and Lemuel murmured because their father “was a visionary man” who made them leave “their precious things . . . because of the foolish imaginations of his heart . . . because they knew not the dealings of that God . . . neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed” (1 Nephi 2:11-13). This complaint was even echoed at one point by their mother Sariah (1 Nephi 5:2). The elder sons believed that Lehi had led them away from Jerusalem “by the foolish imaginations of his

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36; *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 78.

⁴⁵ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 72.

⁴⁶ They may have referred to their encounter with Laban rather than to the actual journey.

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heart” (1 Nephi 17:20).

Nephi, on the other hand, “did not rebel” like his brothers because the Lord confirmed to him by means of visions and revelations the truth of his father’s words. Furthermore, Sam believed Nephi (1 Nephi 2:16-17). For this reason, Laman and Lemuel sought to slay both Lehi and Nephi, saying, “Now, he says that the Lord has talked with him” (1 Nephi 16:37-38). To Nephi, his brethren were not rebelling against their father, but “against the Lord their God,” who had commanded Lehi to leave his homeland (1 Nephi 16:22). Clearly, the real problem with Laman and Lemuel was their lack of faith in the principle of revelation, coupled with the fact that they regretted living in the wilderness, where they could no longer enjoy their possessions in the land of their inheritance (1 Nephi 17:21).⁴⁷

The fact that Lehi’s elder sons complained about his prophetic calling rather than about his ignorance of the desert does not mean that Lehi was acquainted with desert travel. If he was unacquainted with the desert and went only because the Lord sent him there, the only way they could get him to return home was to prove that the Lord did not send him. Therefore, Laman and Lemuel’s best course of attack was to convince Lehi that the Lord did not speak to him.⁴⁸ If Lehi did not know desert life but was convinced that the Lord had sent him, he would not change his mind because of lack of expertise, so such arguments would not have had much effect.

More importantly, we must note that if Lehi was a caravaner, then it was to be expected that his elder sons were already involved in their father’s business. They would have been used to traveling. But they seemed to care nothing at all for such

⁴⁷ They also complained that Nephi, their younger brother, wanted to rule over them (see 1 Nephi 2:22; 16:38).

⁴⁸ They were not even impressed by the fact that an angel had appeared to them, as noted in 1 Nephi 7:10; 17:45.

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ventures. In fact, it is clear they preferred to have remained at home.

Another objection to the theory that Lehi was involved in caravan trade lies in the evidence for the time of his departure from Jerusalem. Since there was water in the Wadi Laman at which he stopped, he must have left his home during the winter. One would expect that, since caravans in the Middle East do not travel during the rainy winter season, when muddy ground and flash floods present dangers and discomfort, Laman and Lemuel, had they been from a caravaning family, would have objected to travel in the off-season. But they did not do so, indicating that such travel was not part of their lifestyle.

LEHI: FARMER OR MERCHANT?

Lehi's wealth (1 Nephi 3:16; 2:4) is cited as evidence that he must have been involved in caravan trade.⁴⁹ "One did not acquire 'exceeding great riches' by running a shop in Jerusalem or a farm in the suburbs," Nibley explains.⁵⁰

It is certainly true that a farmer or a shopkeeper could not be expected to have been a wealthy man. Ironically, however, there is a lot of evidence that Lehi was, indeed, a farmer. Nibley notes that "from his sons Nephi and Jacob one gathers that Lehi must have been something of an expert in vine, olive and fig and honey culture."⁵¹ But the parables told by these men (for example, Jacob 5) do not constitute the totality of our evidence for Lehi's agricultural expertise.

In describing the party's departure from their original campsite beside the River Laman, Nephi wrote, "And we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness" (1

⁴⁹ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

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Nephi 16:11). That the seed was not intended for food is noted by Nibley.⁵² Indeed, it was loaded onto the ship and carried to the New World. In recounting this fact, Nephi tells us that they loaded “meat from the wilderness, and honey in abundance, and provisions according to that which the Lord had commanded us . . . and our seeds, and whatsoever thing we had brought with us” (1 Nephi 18:6). From whence were the seeds brought? In a later passage, describing the arrival in the New World, he tells us that they had been “brought from the land of Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 18:24).

The origin of the seeds is unclear. We do not read about them being taken from Jerusalem, only that they were carried through the wilderness and loaded onto the ship, then planted in the New World. At what point did Lehi bring the seeds from Jerusalem? Nephi and his three elder brethren departed from Jerusalem three times (once with Lehi, once with Zoram and the plates of Laban, and once with Ishmael and his family). There is evidence to indicate that they brought the seeds with them on the third trip.

Immediately after recounting the return of Lehi’s sons from Jerusalem with the family of Ishmael, Nephi recorded, “And it came to pass that we had gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind, both of grain of every kind, and also of the seeds of fruit of every kind” (1 Nephi 8:1). The implication is that these were gathered at the time they returned to fetch Ishmael. Certainly, if the seeds were “from the land of Jerusalem,” Nephi could not have meant that they gathered them in the wilderness of northern Arabia.

This is not consistent with the idea that Lehi knew exactly what provisions should be taken when he left, or the claim that he did not have to send back to Jerusalem “for any necessaries for the journey.” It is also inconsistent with Nibley’s statement that “this argues a high degree of preparation and knowledge in the man”

⁵² Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 61.

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regarding travel. Thus it further brings into doubt the conclusion that Lehi was a caravaner.

The use of the seeds at the group's final destination provides further evidence that Lehi was from a sedentary culture. The description of their arrival in the New World is not that of a nomadic group, with the exception of the mention of "tents." Rather, it describes a group of people well-acquainted with agricultural pursuits:

We did arrive at the promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents; and we did call it the promised land. And it came to pass that we did begin to till the earth, and we began to plant seeds; yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance. And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals, which were for the use of men. And we did find all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper. (1 Nephi 18:23-25; see also 2 Nephi 5:11)

It is true that Lehi was a wealthy man living in the "land of Jerusalem," but not in the city by that name.⁵³ Wherever Lehi lived

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6-7; *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 100-102. It was Nibley who first pointed out that one of the Amarna letters, dating from the fourteenth century B.C., mentioned the "land of Jerusalem," thus justifying the Book of Mormon's statement that Jesus would be born "at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers" (Alma 7:10), for Bethlehem would have been included in the land governed by the city of Jerusalem.

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it appears that he had sufficient land to grow crops and plant trees of various sorts.

LEHI: METALWORKER?

But we must still deal with the question of how Lehi acquired his wealth. As noted above from Nibley's study, it is not reasonable to believe that Lehi could have accumulated wealth from agricultural pursuits. Caravaneering is Nibley's recourse as the only reasonable means by which the prophet could have become rich. But another possibility suggests itself. There is evidence to show that Lehi and his family were craftsmen and artisans—probably metalworkers.⁵⁴

For example, we have Nephi's keen interest in the sword of Laban when he encounters him drunk on the streets (1 Nephi 4:9). Nephi's steel bow (1 Nephi 16:18) might also be an indication of his occupation. (His inability to repair the bow in the desert could be explained by either the lack of iron ore in the region or by the fact that the Lord had forbidden them to make fires, as noted in 1 Nephi 17:12.) And if Laban was somehow related to Lehi, as Nibley first suggested,⁵⁵ then this might be further evidence that the family was involved in metal-working, for Laban was the custodian of the brass plates containing the scriptures.

When the Lord told Nephi, in the land of Bountiful, to build a ship, he had to give detailed instructions on how to do it (1 Nephi 17:8; 18:1-4). But there is no record that Nephi had to ask how to prepare the metal tools with which he built the ship. Rather, he simply asked the Lord where he could find the "ore to

⁵⁴ In the Near East, sons typically enter into the same occupation as their fathers. Hence, the occupation pursued by Nephi can be reasonably expected to be that of his father as well.

⁵⁵ Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 97. If Lehi and Laban are not related, then one is left to wonder why Lehi's genealogy was on the plates in Laban's possession. See 1 Nephi 5:14-16, where we also note that both were descendants of Joseph.

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molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship.” He then constructed a bellows, lit a fire and fabricated the tools (1 Nephi 17:8-11, 16). Nephi stressed that he built the ship according to the way shown him by the Lord, but makes no similar statement regarding the smelting of ore and the making of the bellows and tools for building the ship (1 Nephi 18:1-2). Furthermore, while his brothers mocked his efforts to build a ship, they said not a (recorded) word about his abilities as a smith (1 Nephi 17:17).

Further evidence for Nephi’s metal-working skills came after the group’s arrival in the New World. He reported that they found “all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper” (1 Nephi 18:25). Nephi prepared the plates of ore from which the Book of Mormon ultimately developed, smelting the ore and forming the plates themselves.⁵⁶ He also manufactured “many swords” based on the pattern of the weapon he had taken from Laban in Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:14), though we cannot be sure that these were metal swords. The full range of his talents is explained in the verses that follow this entry:

And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance. And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands. (2 Nephi 5:15-17)

The descendants of Lehi’s colony found “all manner of gold . . . and of silver, and of precious ore of every kind; and there were also curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it; and thus they did become rich” (Helaman 6:11; see Jacob 1:16; 2:12). One of Nephi’s descendants, Moroni, complained that

⁵⁶ 1 Nephi 19:1-5; 2 Nephi 5:30-31. In 1 Nephi 1:17, he wrote of the “plates which I have made with mine own hands.”

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he was running out of “room upon the plates,” and lamented, “and ore I have none” (Mormon 8:5). This implies that he knew what to do with the ore.

John W. Welch has suggested in private conversations with the author that the skepticism of Laman and Lemuel upon the discovery of the Liahona or compass outside Lehi’s tent one morning (1 Nephi 16:10) may be yet another indication of Nephi’s metalworking skills. Lehi’s elder sons seem not to be impressed by this marvelous instrument. Welch has proposed that this may be because they thought the brass ball-like device had been manufactured by their brother in an attempt to convince them that they were doing the right thing by following their father into the wilderness. He notes that 1 Nephi 16:38 refers to Nephi’s using “cunning crafts.” If this suggestion is correct, it would explain why Alma was so insistent in his declaration that no human hand could have fabricated the Liahona (Alma 37:38-39).

If Lehi and his family were metalworkers (living on a plot of land sufficiently large to grow crops as well),⁵⁷ then the source of their wealth is readily explained. From Biblical passages (2 Kings 24:11-15; Jeremiah 24:1; 29:2), as well as the Assyrian and Babylonian documents of that era,⁵⁸ we have learned that craftsmen and smiths were considered in Lehi’s day to belong to the upper class.

S. Kent Brown has suggested that Lehi’s family were bondservants to one or more Arabian clans during their sojourn in

⁵⁷ While it is true that there are and have been nomadic smiths in the Near East, yet the evidence of some Biblical passages is that there were urbanized artisans of various types in the time of Lehi.

⁵⁸ For examples of texts showing the importance of smiths in ancient times, see James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Texts, Relating to the Old Testament*, pp. 269, 292, 556. He cites two further texts in which smiths are listed with royalty (*ibid.*, 293). Other artisans were likewise important. For example, the Babylonian texts that list the food allocations given to the captive king of Judah also list the food given to foreign carpenters who had been taken to Babylon (*ibid.*, 308).

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the desert.⁵⁹ But it seems unlikely that a group of caravaners could have been of much use in Arabia unless they actually traveled elsewhere with the caravans—travel that is never suggested by the Book of Mormon. Moreover, any Arabians already involved in the caravan trade would likely have been much more skilled at it than Lehi. On the other hand, desert nomads could clearly have made use of the skills of metalworkers. Indeed, itinerant metalworkers have long been known in the Middle East.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

Having presented all the evidence then available to him, Nibley wrote, “Put all these things together, and you have a perfectly consistent and convincing picture of Lehi the merchant.”⁶¹ As noted above, however, the picture is not entirely consistent or convincing today. Of course, there is no question as to the importance of trade in Lehi’s day, nor the relevance of comparing Bedouin lifestyle with accounts found in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Indeed, these are important topics, and Hugh Nibley has not only led the discussion of Lehi’s Old World ties, but has far outdistanced other scholars in the field. But even the inestimable value of his contributions to Book of Mormon studies cannot close the door on further research, as he himself has often said.

That research suggests that Lehi was, in fact, a sedentary resident of the land of Jerusalem, living on a plot of land large

⁵⁹ S. Kent Brown, “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (fall 1997): 206-17. See also chapter 4, “Sojourn, Dwell, and Stay: Terms of Servitude,” in his *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon*.

⁶⁰ See, for example, the discussion in William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology & the Religion of Israel*, 96, 121, 197 (note 4), 198 (notes 5 and 7). This issue will be dealt with in greater detail in the author’s forthcoming book, “The House of Jethro: A History of the Kenites.”

⁶¹ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 47.

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enough to enable him to grow food for his family, but also trained in metallurgy. It would have been from the latter that he made his living. His elder sons, Laman and Lemuel, were content to have the fine lifestyle afforded by their family's chosen profession, but they were not interested in working, nor did they believe in their father's prophetic calling. Nephi, on the other hand, followed in his father's footsteps both in terms of his occupational skills and his deep and abiding faith.