A Case for Lehi's Bondage in Arabia

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The lengthy sojourn of Lehi’s family in the Arabian desert invites the almost inevitable question whether circumstances forced family members to live in the service of tribesmen either for protection or for food. In my view, enough clues exist in the Book of Mormon—they have to be assembled—to bring one to conclude that the family lived for a time in a servile condition, a situation that apparently entailed suffering and conflict.
A Case for Lehi's Bondage in Arabia

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Abstract: The lengthy sojourn of Lehi's family in the Arabian desert invites the almost inevitable question whether circumstances forced family members to live in the service of tribesmen either for protection or for food. In my view, enough clues exist in the Book of Mormon—they have to be assembled—to bring one to conclude that the family lived for a time in a servile condition, a situation that apparently entailed suffering and conflict.1

"Eight Years in the Wilderness"

The extended family of Lehi and Sariah required eight years to travel from Jerusalem to the seacoast of southeastern Arabia (1 Nephi 17:4). This span of time suggests that the party spent a considerable period in at least one location. As travelers, they took far more time than caravans did in that era. To illustrate, a loaded caravan of several hundred camels could travel from the coast of

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1 To my knowledge, no one has explained why the family spent this extended stay in the desert. Commentators have only attempted to outline how Lehi and his family coped in the desert, including the Lord’s requirement that they not "make much fire" (1 Nephi 17:12). For example, George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1955), 1:166–67, 173, portray the family as successfully avoiding contact with desert peoples because of the aid of the Liahona. Hugh Nibley similarly observes that the desert was a dangerous place and that Lehi’s family did their best to avoid contact with its inhabitants, Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 47–49, 63–67.
the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea—approximately the assumed route traveled by Lehi and his family, though in reverse—in a matter of weeks, not years. The family seems to have spent most of the eight years along the southern leg of their journey, from the point where they began to “travel nearly eastward” until they reached “the sea, which we called Irreantum” (1 Nephi 17:1, 5). Evidently, each of the two earlier stages of the journey—from Jerusalem to the first camp and from that camp to Nahom where the party buried Ishmael—took less than one year. The first stage comprised the flight to a locale “three days” south of the northeastern tip of the Red Sea, some 250 miles south of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:5–6), as well as the two times that Lehi’s sons returned to the city, first for the brass plates and then for the family of Ishmael (1 Nephi 3–5, 7). One must also add time for the visionary experiences of Lehi and Nephi (1 Nephi 8, 11–14) and the marriage festivities of the children of Lehi and Ishmael (1 Nephi 16:7). Under normal circumstances, all these events would have required possibly seven or eight months, certainly no more than a year. Any suggestion that Lehi’s family farmed for a season or two at the first camp does not take into account the observation that in a desert clime all arable land and all water resources have claimants.

The second stage of the journey covered the ground from the first camp to “the place which was called Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34), a segment that Nephi narrates only in moderate detail (1 Nephi 16:12–39). In my view, this took less than a year. The keys lie in two notations: the marriages and the subsequent births of the first children. Evidently, the weddings took place not long before the family departed the camp (1 Nephi 16:7, 12). Then traveling in “a south-southeast direction,” the party reached Nahom, where Ishmael died (1 Nephi 16:13, 34). It is only after

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2 According to Nigel Groom, the usual time for a caravan to travel from Zofar (or Dhofar) on the Indian Ocean to Gaza on the Mediterranean coast was 120 days, a distance of 2,100 miles, *Frankincense and Myrrh* (London: Longman, 1981), chart on 213.

3 Such a suggestion would rest on Nephi’s statement that “we did gather ... all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us” (1 Nephi 16:11). These “provisions” could have been brought by Ishmael’s family. Nibley points out that all desert land that can grow crops is claimed, *Lehi in the Desert*, 66.
relating events associated with Ishmael’s burial that Nephi mentioned the first births (1 Nephi 17:1). Hence, it is reasonable to reckon that this stage of the trip required less than a year, assuming that two or three daughters of Ishmael became pregnant soon after their marriages and that they bore their first children soon after the death of their father, about the time the party turned "nearly eastward."

It is this eastward stage of the journey that apparently took the most time. And it may well have been in this segment that, in the recollection of King Benjamin, the party “did not . . . progress in their journey, but were driven back, . . . and . . . were smitten with famine and sore afflictions” (Mosiah 1:17). While “famine and sore afflictions” occasionally characterized the family’s trip from the first camp to Nahom, their eastward route along the south edge of Arabia’s Empty Quarter would have brought more intense troubles since they were leaving areas of population and cultivation. In addition, we know of no specific instances of an extended break in the journey in the earlier two stages, except for the few days that they stopped because of Nephi’s broken bow (1 Nephi 16:17–32). Further, at no time in his narrative of the journey from the camp to Nahom did Nephi write of being “driven back.” Whatever King Benjamin had in mind, it seems not to have been a part of the trip to Nahom.

In this light, the family apparently spent the bulk of the eight years between Nahom and “the sea.” Even if only a part of the difficulties listed by Benjamin occurred during this stage, it seems reasonable that this segment formed the most troublesome part of the journey. Southern Arabia has been known from antiquity to modern times as a place of inhospitable tribes and slave trafficking, including the subjugation of entire tribes.4 Moreover, the

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4 The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, an anonymous work dated to about A.D. 150, describes places and peoples of Arabia, chiefly those near the coastline, and calls the people of the northwest coastal area, where Lehi’s family first camped, “rascally men” who “plundered” ships and took “for slaves” those who survived shipwrecks. The south coast was characterized by traffic in “slaves,” including “female slaves,” and its “inhabitants are a treacherous lot, very little civilized,” Groom, Frankincense, 90, 94, quoting the translation of W. H. Schoff. From the Islamic period, the Koran refers often to slaves, both in terms of booty (Sūrah 33:50) and in terms of manumission (e.g., Sūrah 4:92; 5:89). In modern times, Bertram Thomas spoke of slaves in the south of Oman in the
family evidently had little or no expendable property to exchange for food. For Lehi had left his moveable wealth behind in Jerusalem, and it was later lost to Laban (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:22–26). In addition, the family seems not to have taken clean animals, since they hunted regularly and ran out of food at least twice between the camp and Nahom (1 Nephi 16:14–15, 18–19, 39). Further, the fact that they twice faced starvation before starting the eastward leg of the journey hints strongly that family members were by now in no position to avoid seeking assistance from tribesmen in exchange for their services, even if such a situation led to severe difficulties either during the period of such services or when the family tried to move on. 

"We Did Sojourn"

A further key lies in the verb to sojourn, which appears twice in Nephi’s narrative, both occurrences coming after his notation that the party turned “nearly eastward.” This observation may be significant in light of what we have just learned. Nephi recorded that “we did travel nearly eastward ... and wade through much affliction. ... [God] did provide means for us while we did sojourn in the wilderness. And we did sojourn for the space of ... eight years in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:1, 3–4).

In the Bible, the term to sojourn often refers to servile relationships. On one level, Nephi’s choice of the verb to sojourn

1920s and 1930s, noting the remarkable, continuing phenomenon that the entire Shahara tribe lived “in groups among their Qara overlords, hewing their wood and drawing their water.” Referring to tribes of south Arabia, Thomas observed that “Instability is the chief characteristic of any regime in tribal Arabia,” Arabia Felix (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1932), 47, 15, 22–35. Thirty years later, Wendell Phillips wrote of the extreme difficulties of moving from one tribal area to another in southern Arabia, some tribes living in a state of perpetual war with others, Unknown Oman (New York: McKay, 1966), 230–31.

5 The complaints of the two older sons, which Nephi kept in his account, speaks of the general suffering of all members of the party: “we have suffered in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:21; compare the complaints of Ishmael’s daughters in 16:35).

6 Although one cannot consult the original ancient text of the Book of Mormon from which Joseph Smith translated, one has to assume—correctly, in my view—that the English text represents a reasonably accurate translation. For the biblical text, David Daube sets out servile connections for the verb to
mirrors a meaning found in the Old Testament, that of a refugee enjoying the protection of God, a point that Nephi noted. On another level, *to sojourn* may also reflect the biblical sense of a stranger or refugee living under the protection of another person. The remaining sense in which Nephi seems to use the term has to do with placing oneself under the care of another by selling one's services. In the best of situations, one became an employee, a day-laborer as it were. In the worst of cases, one became a slave, or the property of another, so that one's freedom had to be obtained by purchase.

In this light, did Nephi's parents and siblings experience subjugation to, or dependence on, desert dwellers? As far as I am aware, no one has suggested such a possibility. Instead, most


The full discussions of gēr are instructive in Theological Dictionary, 2:439–49, and Theological Lexicon, 1:307–10. The sense that I am suggesting for the term in the Book of Mormon is that, in preexilic Israel, the sojourner "is usually the servant of an Israelite, who is lord and patron," Theological Lexicon, 1:308. On this point, see Daube, Exodus Pattern, 24–26. Kellermann's rendition of the term sojourners as "protected citizens" while enslaved in Egypt (Leviticus 19:34) is naïve at best, Theological Dictionary, 2:449.

Dependency should not surprise us because one would need protection in the desert. Even along the "incense trail" in areas inland from the Red Sea, as Nigel Groom reminds us, caravaneers "moved through harsh tribal areas inhabited by nomads, where unpredictable squabbles could put both their profits and, perhaps, their lives at risk." Away from major centers of civilization, he notes, "in the absence of strong rule, law and order must have been precarious," Frankincense, 197–98. Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79), in his Natural History, observed that "of these innumerable tribes an equal part are engaged in trade or live by brigandage," 6.32 (§162).

Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, "In Search Lehi's Trail, Part 2," Ensign (October 1976): 38, suggest that the family may have sought "asylum" with a desert tribesman. The hint that Nephi preached while "in the wilderness" (D&C 33:8) does not alter this possibility.
interpreters have focused only on what Nephi himself recorded in his typically understated way about the severe difficulties encountered by the family. But hints elsewhere in the text point to a period when family members lived in contact with desert dwellers—they could not have escaped such contact—suffering troubles and conflict in the process.

The first person to refer back to this period was Lehi. When he blessed his younger sons Jacob and Joseph, he called the years of his family's sojourn in the wilderness both "the days of my tribulation" (2 Nephi 2:1) and especially "the wilderness of mine afflictions" and "the days of my greatest sorrow" (2 Nephi 3:1). For Lehi, it was the worst of times. How so? To be sure, Lehi was evidently well-equipped for desert living, for he lived on the edge of the desert that extends east and south from Jerusalem; he must have known the rigors that one encounters in such a clime. If Lehi, then, was equipped and reasonably experienced, there must have been an event—or series of events—that had soured him.

Turning to Alma the Younger, we note that he recalled the kindnesses of God to Lehi and his family in the desert in the following: "[God] has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also . . . delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day" (Alma 36:29). The last phrase, of course, tells us that Alma had in mind all the generations from Lehi to his own, some of whom had suffered "bondage and captivity." In my reading, Alma is saying that Lehi's generation had also experienced "bondage and captivity." Besides the evident sense of the passage, one compelling point has to do with the parallelism set up by the prior verse

11 Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary, 1:173-74; Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 63-65; Robert L. Millet and Joseph F. McConkie, Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:131-32. Nephi seems to speak rather blandly about the severity of the problems that faced family members by noting generally "much affliction" (1 Nephi 17:1) and "many afflictions and much difficulty" (1 Nephi 17:6).

12 As one gauge of the severe impact of the desert experience, Jacob, who had been born in the desert to Lehi and Sariah, seems to have remained a sober, serious person all his life (see Jacob 7:26).

13 Lehi was equipped with "tents" and other means for desert living and was apparently able to leave his home without delay (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:9; 16:12; etc.). See Nibley's discussion in Lehi in the Desert, 46-49.
wherein Alma notes in almost identical language that the Lord had “delivered [our fathers] out of bondage and captivity from time to time,” the reference pointing to “our fathers [in] Egypt” (Alma 36:28). Thus the phrase from time to time, which appears in both verses 28 and 29, strengthens the observation that, in common with the Hebrew slaves, the generation of Lehi had suffered “bondage and captivity.”

This comment leads to another reminiscence of Alma. In an earlier address to people in Ammonihah, Alma recounted that “our father, Lehi, was brought out of Jerusalem by the hand of God . . . through the wilderness.” Immediately thereafter Alma asked the question: “have ye forgotten . . . how many times he delivered our fathers out of the hands of their enemies, and preserved them from being destroyed?” (Alma 9:9–10). Enemies? Destroyed? Do these expressions fit into a picture of Lehi in the desert? To be sure, the phrase “our fathers” may point to an intermediate generation, nearer Alma’s time, who had suffered difficulties with “their enemies.” But the context also allows the possibility that Lehi, too, had experienced troubles with “enemies.”

As an additional consideration, in another part of this speech Alma observed that these same Nephite ancestors, led “out of the land of Jerusalem,” had also “been saved from famine, and from sickness, and all manner of diseases, . . . they having waxed strong in battle, that they might not be destroyed” (Alma 9:22). Certainly, Alma had in mind here more than Lehi’s party because he went on to speak of those “brought out of bondage time after time . . . until now” (Alma 9:22). But the fact that the events of Lehi’s generation had triggered such reminiscences illumines the likelihood that references to physical difficulties, such as “sickness” and “diseases,” as well as to “enemies” and to “battle,”

14 The notation that immediately follows—“even by the hands of their own brethren” (Alma 9:10)—opens further the possibility that the reference is to Lehi and his children since the older sons sought at least once to kill Lehi (1 Nephi 16:37; 17:44) and three times to kill the younger son Nephi (1 Nephi 7:16; 16:37; 2 Nephi 5:3–4; cf. 2 Nephi 1:24), even though the word “brethren” can refer to unfriendly Lamanites (e.g., Mosiah 28:1; Alma 17:9; 48:21).

15 The Roman geographer Strabo, writing of an ill-fated military expedition to western Arabia in 25–24 B.C., said that a majority of the original army of
point to hardships experienced in the harsh environment of Arabia, what with a lack of food, water, and fuel, and the presence of unfriendly tribesmen.16

One further consideration is both relevant and illuminating. It concerns the principle that the Lord orchestrates experiences for prophets so that they come to see matters as the Lord sees them, thus adding intensity and acuity to their messages. Thirty-five years ago, Abraham Heschel noted this aspect of prophetic experience, selecting the marriage of Hosea as proof.17 This said, we turn to Lehi’s prophetic messages after he had emerged from the desert.

As he speaks to his children and grandchildren just before his death, Lehi brings to view the clashing concepts of captivity and freedom. For instance, in language that recalls slavery, he pleads with his sons that they “shake off the awful chains” by which “they are carried away captive,” being “led according to the . . . captivity of the devil,” with no control over their own destiny (2 Nephi 1:13, 18). Further, he urges them to “shake off the chains . . . and arise from the dust” (2 Nephi 1:23).18 As a second example, Lehi’s whole concern with “redemption . . .

10,000 died from “hunger and fatigue and diseases,” a tragedy that he attributed to “the water and herbs” of the region, Geography 16.4.23–24. Referring to the area inland and along the southern coast of Arabia, almost two hundred years later the author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea recorded that “these places are very unhealthy, and pestilential even to those sailing along the coast; but almost always fatal to those working there, who also perish often from want of food,” cited in Groom, Frankincense, 92.

16 For other summaries in the Book of Mormon of Lehi’s journey through Arabia, as well as aspects of their experiences there, see 1 Nephi 17:1–2, 12; 2 Nephi 1:24; 2:2; 3:3; Alma 18:37–38; 36:29; 37:38–42. King Benjamin characterized this era as one of “sore afflictions” (Mosiah 1:17), an expression linked elsewhere to “bondage” (Mosiah 7:28; 12:2–4), though not in all its other occurrences (Mosiah 9:3; Alma 61:4; 62:37).

17 Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 56, wrote that Hosea’s strange marriage “was a lesson” instead of “a symbol.” Further, its “purpose was not to demonstrate divine attitudes to the people, but to educate Hosea himself in the understanding of divine sensibility.”

18 It is also important to note how he speaks of the promised land, calling it “a land of liberty,” whose inhabitants “shall never be brought down into captivity” and “shall dwell safely forever,” except for the cause of iniquity” (2 Nephi 1:7, 9).
through the Holy Messiah” borrows language from the freeing of slaves (2 Nephi 2:6). Thus he declares that the Messiah is “to redeem the children of men,” making them “free forever,” terminology associated with ending servitude (2 Nephi 2:27). One naturally asks, does not the force of these concepts arise at least partially from Lehi’s shared experiences with his children? In light of our review so far, the answer has to be yes.

At this juncture, we might venture a tentative reconstruction. Lehi’s family, finding themselves without disposable wealth when they turned “nearly eastward” at Nahom, were obliged at some point thereafter to sell their services to one or more local tribesmen for food or protection, or both. The labor was hard on all, particularly the women (1 Nephi 17:20). It was after family members tried to extract themselves from this situation that severe conflict arose—“battle” in Alma’s words—with “enemies,” whether tribal members whom they served or members of a rival tribe.

Evidence from Isaiah 48–49

Nephi’s addition of Isaiah 48–49 to the end of his first book (1 Nephi 20–21) has partly to do with his conviction that Isaiah spoke of his family’s experience in the desert. To be sure, Isaiah 48–49 stands within the larger prophetic message about the scattering and gathering of Israel, of which Nephi and his family (the scattered) and their distant posterity (the gathered) were a part. But Nephi says that “the Lord “did show unto many [prophets] concerning us” (1 Nephi 19:21), a statement made after summarizing his family’s journey to the land of promise, now more than twenty years behind them, and just before introducing these chapters from Isaiah. Evidently in Nephi’s view, Isaiah’s prophecies had anticipated the family’s trip to the promised land. Nephi is thus saying, “Isaiah spoke about us.”

As an example—and this point is important—Isaiah’s words about scattered Israelites

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19 Nephi’s assertion that the Lord “did show unto many [prophets] concerning us” (1 Nephi 19:21) must also have included Zenock, Neum, and Zenos, whose words he had just quoted (1 Nephi 19:10–17; cf. 10:12–13). Nephi then immediately introduces Isaiah 48–49 by instructing his people not only to “hear... the words of the prophet [Isaiah]” but also to “liken [Isaiah’s words] unto yourselves” (1 Nephi 19:24; cf. Jacob’s observation in 2 Nephi 6:5).
also fit precisely the circumstances of the departure of Lehi’s family:

Hearken . . . all ye that are broken off and are driven out because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people; yea, all ye that are broken off, that are scattered abroad, who are of my people, O house of Israel. (1 Nephi 21:1 [= Isaiah 49:1])

Obviously, Isaiah had anticipated a time when corrupt officials would rule people in the city, a situation that Lehi experienced in his day. And it seems evident that Nephi had seen the relevance of such passages to the family’s situation. To make a further point, we turn to a sampling of passages in Isaiah that have to do with Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, directed as it was by the Lord and forced by public pressure. One must understand that only a year or so earlier the Babylonians had forced the city to surrender and had installed Zedekiah as a puppet king (2 Kings 24:10-19). In this connection, one notices expressions in Isaiah that have to do with Babylonians. For instance, for those who find themselves captive to the Babylonians, the Lord will exercise his right of seeking the release of his people who are enslaved abroad—an important point for our purposes—saying to them,

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20 The passage quoted here stands neither in the Hebrew nor in the Greek text of Isaiah 49:1.

21 One finds further reference to the corruption and iniquity in the city when Lehi began his preaching. Of that day, Isaiah holds that the citizens of Jerusalem will “swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness. Nevertheless, they call themselves of the holy city, but they do not stay themselves upon the God of Israel” (1 Nephi 20:1-2 [= Isaiah 48:1-2]). Of such wickedness among persons in Jerusalem, Nephi later said that “their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations” (2 Nephi 25:2). Incidentally, the Book of Mormon text of Isaiah 48:1-2 differs in important ways from that of the underlying Hebrew text of the King James Version.

22 See 1 Nephi 2:2, “the Lord commanded my father . . . that he should . . . depart”; and 7:14, “they have driven him [Lehi] out of the land.”

23 This legal right undergirds the entire exodus saga of the Hebrew slaves. See David Daube, Exodus Pattern, 39-41. In addition, I have set out the meaning of this legal right for the visit of the risen Jesus to the Nephites and Lamanites in “Moses and Jesus: The Old Adorns the New,” in The Book of Mormon:
Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye . . . : The Lord hath redeemed his servant Jacob. (1 Nephi 20:20 [= Isaiah 48:20])

Without multiplying examples, we note compelling allusions to servitude in the desert. The reference to “these . . . children” born while one is “a captive” (1 Nephi 21:21 [= Isaiah 49:21]) could certainly be understood as pointing to Jacob and Joseph, children born to Lehi and Sariah in the wilderness. Moreover, the remark about the one who would “deal very treacherously” but from whom the Lord would “defer mine anger . . . that I cut [him] not off” (1 Nephi 20:8–9 [= Isaiah 48:8–9]) could apply not only to Nephi’s older brothers, for whom the Lord showed abundant patience during the journey and whose posterity was to survive, but also to a desert tribesman to whom Lehi’s family owed temporary allegiance.

Another strong statement on


In a further reference to Babylonians, affirming that the Lord is in charge, Isaiah says that the Lord “will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall come upon the Chaldeans” (1 Nephi 20:14 [= Isaiah 48:14]). Incidentally, these verses (1 Nephi 20:14; Isaiah 48:14) are not the same. The Book of Mormon text adds an entire sentence in the middle of the verse that concerns the fulfillment of prophecy and does not appear in the Hebrew or Greek texts of Isaiah.

For Nephi, the future survival of the posterity of his older and younger brothers was beyond question (1 Nephi 12:19–20; 2 Nephi 3:3, 23). Even though Nephi knew—and this knowledge brought him deep pain (1 Nephi 15:5; 2 Nephi 26:7, 10)—that his own descendants would eventually be destroyed, indisputable hints point to the survival of a remnant as well as descendants from the other members of the family. See 1 Nephi 13:30; 15:13–14, 18; 22:7–8; 2 Nephi 10:2; cf. 2 Nephi 3:3, 23; 4:7; 9:53; 25:8, 21; 3 Nephi 21:7; Ether 13:7.

One can also include reference to those whom the Lord looses from prison and darkness, whom he “shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places” because the Lord “will . . . not forget thee” since “I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands” (1 Nephi 21:9, 15–16 [= Isaiah 49:9, 15–16]). On darkness and prison, see also Lehi’s appeal to his older sons to “awake from a deep sleep” in order to “shake off the awful chains by which ye are bound” that make them “captive” (2 Nephi 1:13; see also 1:21, 23). One is left to wonder whether Lehi’s vivid language arises from personal experience,
difficulties in the desert has to do with the refining process in “the furnace of affliction,” which of course can allude to the heat that one experiences either in the desert or a place of trial.27 I “do this,” the Lord says, because “I will not suffer my name to be polluted” (1 Nephi 20:10–11 [= Isaiah 48:10–11]).28

On the side of assuring the Lord’s assistance to those who may struggle in the desert, one finds a number of examples in these chapters of Isaiah, including those that allude to the Lord guiding his people away from trouble. For instance, Nephi, if not others, must have taken courage from the Lord’s assurance that he “leadeth thee by the way thou shouldst go” and that those who trust in him “thirsted not” because “he led them through the deserts” and “caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them” (1 Nephi 20:17, 21 [= Isaiah 48:17, 21]). Moreover, continuing the desert imagery:

They shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor the sun smite them; for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. (1 Nephi 21:10 [= Isaiah 49:10])

Plainly, one can identify a number of passages that naturally would have spoken to the situation of the family while traveling through Arabia,29 including several that point to servitude and God’s merciful rescue of his people from such a state.

including his words about the latter-day release from “captivity unto freedom” (2 Nephi 3:5).

27 As in the portrayal of Egypt in Deuteronomy 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jeremiah 11:4.

28 I follow the reading of 1 Nephi, not that of the King James Version.

29 In addition, it is the Lord “who leadeth thee by the way thou shouldst go” (1 Nephi 20:17 [= Isaiah 48:17]). On feeding and pasturing “in all high places” (1 Nephi 21:9), as well as the Lord’s promise to “make all my mountains a way” (1 Nephi 21:11 [= Isaiah 49:11]), compare the function of the brass ball that “led us in the more fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:16). Moreover, the expression “those who are in the east” (1 Nephi 21:13 [= Isaiah 49:13])—certainly tied to “these ... from afar” who are “from the north and from the west” (1 Nephi 21:12 [= Isaiah 49:12]), which matches the directions the family had traveled from Jerusalem—could be seen as referring not only to the extended family who traveled east through Arabia to reach the shore of the sea, but possibly even to the direction that they traveled on the sea in order to reach the Americas.
Conclusion

Taken together, it seems reasonable that the years spent by Lehi and his family in crossing the desert were characterized by the not uncommon practice “in times of scarcity” of “the bargaining away of freedom—or part of it—in return for food.”\(^{30}\) Whether the “enemies” (Alma 9:10), the escape from destruction “in battle” (Alma 9:22), and the “bondage and captivity” (Alma 36:29) had to do with a single experience with desert dwellers is impossible to determine. Whatever the case, Nephi’s choice of the term to sojourn—also an Old Testament term commonly denoting servanthood—when combined with Lehi’s remarks and the chapters chosen from Isaiah, most likely points to a period of servitude and conflict during the desert journey.\(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Daube, Exodus Pattern, 25. For the fleeing family of Lehi, food was crucial, “provisions” (1 Nephi 2:4; 16:11) and “seed,” (1 Nephi 16:11).

\(^{31}\) Whether it was to save fuel, along with the efforts that one expends to find fuel, or whether it was to avoid drawing attention to themselves that the Lord “suffered [not] that we should make much fire, as we journeyed in the wilderness,” or both, is not clear from the account (1 Nephi 17:12). Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary, 1:173, and Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 63–67, opt for the latter explanation.