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Desert Epiphany: Sariah and the Women in 1 Nephi

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Insights can be gained by considering the eight-year wilderness sojourn of Lehi’s company through the eyes of the women who were there. Leaving the comforts of civilization for the difficulties of the desert would have been very challenging. While the record in 1 Nephi mentions nine women, Sariah was the only one identified by name. Nephi records Sariah’s struggles as well as her testimony. The record of the women in 1 Nephi communicates much about the need to seek and receive one’s own witness of truth.
Perhaps one of the greatest deterrents to effective scripture study is the pattern of reading verses in the same order, focusing on the same insights, and asking the same questions. When I have considered a different perspective in scripture study, I have nearly always discovered new insights, almost as though supplemental verses had been added since my last reading. I found myself asking questions I had not considered and seeing connections I had not recognized.

When reading 1 Nephi, one might profitably consider the eight-year wilderness experience through the eyes of the women in Lehi’s company. Because 1 Nephi was recorded by two men (Lehi and Nephi), we naturally encounter their faith and sacrifice on every page. The women, however, are not nearly as visible as the men, and their voices may initially appear muted or feeble.
D
ting ancient Israel’s history, the prevalent culture and interpretation of law showed little sensitivity toward women. For example, Israelite law viewed women as an extension of their fathers or husbands. Since at marriage daughters became members of another man’s family, men perceived women as “aliens or transients within their family of residence.”1 Additionally, divorce laws differentiated men from women: Only men were given directives pertaining to divorce, implying that women could not initiate a divorce (see Deuteronomy 24:1–4). A man could legally sell his daughter into marriage to settle a debt (see Exodus 21:7–9), but no mention is made of sons being sold. A male Hebrew servant was automatically freed after seven years of servitude, but a female servant was freed only if her basic needs were not being met (see Exodus 21:2–4, 10–11). Moreover, lineage assignment and transmission of land inheritance were traced through men (see Numbers 27:8; 36:6–8), and Israelite society considered women to be unclean twice as long after bearing a daughter as after giving birth to a son (see Leviticus 12:2–5).

Portions of Nephi’s writings reflect that Lehi and his family were products of this Israelite culture. For example, Nephi reported that Lehi “left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things” (1 Nephi 2:4) and that he and his brothers secured the brass plates containing “the genealogy of my father” (1 Nephi 3:12). He summarized his writings as “the things of my father, and also of my brethren” (1 Nephi 10:1). We can be sure that Nephi’s mother, wife, sisters-in-law, mother-in-law, sisters, and daughters in fact also figured prominently in the soul-stretching events of establishing a homeland in the New World. Yet, although Nephi recorded the names of his father and brothers, the only woman’s name to appear in his record is his mother’s, Sariah.

On the other hand, we stand in awe at the divine wisdom that permeates Nephi’s writings and supersedes his national culture. First, we hear God’s voice through doctrine taught by prophets who themselves may not have completely recognized the depth contained in their pronouncements. These inspired sermons contain no hint of inequality between men and women and seem to contradict the predominant culture of the time. Nephi boldly declared that God “denyeth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33). Likewise, Nephi’s younger brother taught that “the one being is as precious in [God’s] sight as the other” (Jacob 2:21). Despite a cultural tendency to blur the importance of any segment of the population, God’s doctrine and promises speak to all his children and transcend every mortal culture.2

Second, Nephi’s writings actually do include multiple references to women. “The wonder is not that there is so little about women in the Book of Mormon but that there is so much, given the times and traditions.”3 Seen in this light, instances in which women are included in Nephi’s narrative should be regarded not as inconsequential but as worthy of serious consideration.

Who Were the Women in 1 Nephi?
Nephi specifically mentions nine women: Sariah, Ishmael’s wife, Ishmael’s five daughters (four of whom became wives to Lehi’s four eldest sons, and one who married Laban’s servant, Zoram; see 1 Nephi 16:7), and the two women who married into Ishmael’s family before their departure from

Nephi’s wife showed support and commitment (see 1 Nephi 18:15, 19) that she must have gained in part from her mother-in-law, Sariah.
Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 7:6). Nephi referenced his "sisters" in 2 Nephi 5:6, but no supporting information is supplied in the text concerning the number of sisters or their birth order in the family. John L. Sorenson argues that these girls were born in Jerusalem, before the family departed, and would have been younger than Nephi; "otherwise there would be no way to place them in Sariah's birth history." Let it suffice that at least nine urban women were thrust into an eight-year desert existence. Not only did these nine survive, but the experience changed their lives forever. Considering the wilderness experience through their eyes affords insights that otherwise would elude us.

Sariah

Sariah was the first and only woman that Nephi identified by name in his record. In almost reverential tones, he acknowledges her in the opening line ("I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . .") and specifically names her when identifying his family members (see 1 Nephi 2:5). The name Sariah apparently comes from the Hebrew name נָרָה (šryh). Book of Mormon critics have argued that while šryh is detectable 19 times in the Bible as a male name, there is no evidence that the name was applied to a woman. In response, Jeffrey R. Chadwick discovered a reference to a woman from Elephantine named "šryḥ, daughter of Hosea,"⁵ in a fifth-century-b.c. Aramaic papyrus. In the feminine usage, the name probably means “princess of Jehovah,” derived from the Hebrew root for sar(ah), meaning “prince” or “princess,” and jah, a derivative of Jehovah.⁶

Furthermore, in his record Nephi provided more descriptive coverage of his mother than of any other woman. In chapter 5 of 1 Nephi, 10 consecutive verses give attention to Sariah (see 1 Nephi 5:1–10). This account relates Sariah's fearful reaction when her sons had not returned from securing the brass plates from Laban. A hasty and narrow review of these verses could lead a casual reader to conclude that Sariah was a “murmurer.” But that approach ignores how women were generally viewed in that culture.

We consider the following questions: What was required of Sariah to leave her accustomed lifestyle in Jerusalem? What indications of Sariah’s faith emerge when the family departed? Why would Nephi choose to record this incident to focus our attention on his mother—an incident that clearly manifests her murmuring against Lehi? Why not choose an experience that more obviously showed her spiritual strength? What implications did Sariah’s attitude have on the other women who eventually joined Lehi’s company? These are some of the questions I would like to explore in this study.

Departure from Jerusalem

To appreciate the sacrifice involved in the company’s departure from Jerusalem, we tease out of the record a few hints about the home Lehi and Sariah left behind. Nephi frequently commented that his father was a wealthy man. He referred to the family’s “gold and silver, and all manner of riches” (1 Nephi 3:16), their “precious things” (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:22), and Laban’s lustful response to the abundance of Lehi’s family property (see 1 Nephi 3:25). So we may assume that the family inhabited one of the better houses in or near the city and enjoyed unusually favorable health and dietary conditions.⁷ Archaeologists have uncovered well-built homes inside walled Jerusalem, in a section of the city called the City of David. These homes date to the seventh century b.c. and show signs of being destroyed by fire at the time of the Babylonian invasion in 586 b.c.⁸ Although Lehi and Sariah most likely lived in another sector of the city, these contemporary homes give us an idea of the comparative luxury their family would have known.

One of those uncovered houses was a four-room, two-story building with substantial pillars supporting the roof and dressed limestone blocks framing the doorways. The house measured 24 by 36 feet. A “service wing,” made up of three tiny rooms behind the home, contained an indoor toilet and quarters for servants.⁹ Remains of other “better” homes in Jerusalem indicate that residents owned-
chairs, tables, beds, numerous clay oil lamps, an oven, stone structures for storing grain, and clay vessels for storing liquids. Decoration in the form of pictorial art, faience vases, glass beads, carved ivory plaques, decorated pottery, and metal art products adorned nicer homes.

Although leaving home was a sacrifice for Lehi, it was arguably a greater test of faith for Sariah. Four reasons support this suggestion. First, Sariah undoubtedly spent more time at home and had more domestic responsibilities than did Lehi, so leaving home would have tremendous significance for her. According to Israelite tradition, the female head of the household supervised all other women in the home, including unmarried daughters, daughters-in-law, and servants. Sariah’s world revolved around her home, whereas both commercial and religious duties would have frequently taken Lehi outside the home.

Furthermore, they left their “precious things” behind to take only “family, and provisions, and tents” (1 Nephi 2:4). Having visited Bedouin camps along a possible route followed by Lehi’s family, some LDS researchers suggest “provisions” included “wheat, flour, barley, dried sour milk, olive or sesame oil, olives, dates, a few cooking utensils, bedding, and weapons such as bows, arrows, and knives” but would not have included eating utensils. It is unlikely that Sariah took beautiful trinkets or home decorations to soften the harsh reality of tent living.

In recent centuries nomadic women, such as Bedouin women, possessed one simple locked box to hold their valuables. Each woman wore the key on her headscarf. Even wives of the very wealthy had only one box, albeit a very lavish box. Bedouin women also wore their valuables, in the form of coins and jewelry, around their necks and wrists. One wonders whether Sariah did the same. The wealth around her neck or niceties in her box may have gradually disappeared as necessity to survive in the desert required trading or selling them. After all, Nephi said that his father left his possessions behind (see 1 Nephi 2:4); he made no such claim for his mother’s wearable wealth. Whether from the beginning of their journey or later as the family sailed to a new land, the implication is that Sariah was devoid of any tangible reminder of a privileged life known in Jerusalem.

A second reason suggesting departure was more difficult for Sariah was that Lehi would have adjusted more easily to full-time tent living than Sariah could have. Hugh Nibley described Lehi as “an expert on caravan travel.” Family members complained about Lehi’s visions but never about his lack of skill in leading and preserving his family in the wilderness. Likewise, his sons appear to have had previous wilderness hunting experience, particularly Nephi, who owned a steel bow (see 1 Nephi 16:14–18). Nephi’s brothers mocked his proposal to build a ship but never his ability to hunt in the wilderness.

In contrast, tradition suggests that women remained at home during caravan runs. One wonders whether Sariah had ever spent time in a tent. Granted, Lehi would have owned a fine tent with accommodations to increase comfort and protection, but even the most luxurious tent would have been a poor substitute for Sariah’s Jerusalem home.

Third, perhaps more difficult than leaving her house’s comforts and luxuries, Sariah had to leave kinfolk and associations with other women. As the family embarked on its journey, Nephi named Sariah as the sole woman in a cast of “large in stature” men. The implication is that Sariah initially lacked female companionship during a demanding adjustment period. Having another woman to commiserate with and share the burden of increasing demands surely would have bolstered Sariah’s courage and made the going easier.

Fourth, Nephi gives no indication that his mother received her own personal witness from the
Lord of the necessity of fleeing Jerusalem. Lehi, on the other hand, received many visions and dreams (see 1 Nephi 1:16) that allowed him to see, hear, and read in order to know God and his will. In response to his prayer, Lehi “saw and heard much” that caused him to “quake and tremble exceedingly” (1 Nephi 1:6). He saw “God sitting upon his throne,” and “One descending out of the midst of heaven” whose “luster was above that of the sun at noon-day” and “twelve others following him, [whose] brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Nephi 1:8–10). These glorious personages gave Lehi a book from which he read about Jerusalem’s imminent destruction (see 1 Nephi 1:13–14). Finally, the Lord commanded Lehi “in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:2).

All of these revelations underscore the Lord’s obvious love and trust for his prophet, Lehi, as well as Lehi’s commendable faith and obedience, even when his life was threatened by angry Jerusalemites. In an understatement, Nephi simply observes, “And it came to pass that [Lehi] was obedient unto the word of the Lord. . . . And it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:3, 4).

These dreams and visions, however, tell us little about Sariah. She also was obedient to the word of the Lord and departed into the wilderness. Why did she leave? The record is silent. If her mother did not record it—nor would we expect him to, given his culture. Was Sariah illiterate, as was typical for women of that day, and therefore limited in her access to scripture? Surely her ready obedience to the Lord’s command through Lehi that the family leave Jerusalem is indicative of a strong faith and resolve to follow the Lord’s will, respect for her husband, and honor to her marriage covenant.

Yes, Sariah obeyed, as did her prophet-husband, leaving behind a beautiful, servant-supported home surrounded by kinfolk and friends to live in a world to which she was unaccustomed. There is no indication that Sariah murmured as she left Jerusalem. She apparently undertook the wilderness trek because a prophet had borne witness that such was the will of God and she trusted that his witness was true.

**Sariah’s Crisis**

As if the Lord were stretching her to the brink of her faith, Sariah soon encountered another test far more demanding than abandoning her home and kinfolk. Facing the potential loss of all four of her sons, she “murmured” (see 1 Nephi 5:1–3). It was one thing to leave a comfortable lifestyle, but quite another to have her most precious blessing torn from her. Children were the focus of life for women in ancient Israel (see Psalms 127:3; 128:3). Only in their roles as mothers did Israelite women receive honor and authority. “The [Israelite] woman’s primary and essential role within the family . . . accounts for her highest personal and social reward.”

More specifically, being a mother of sons created a woman’s greatest source of joy and comfort. Sons were seen as a particular blessing not only because they could defend the family in the face of opposition, but because they promised a continuation of the family name. A reciprocal love was typical among the sons of these mothers. Charles A. Doughty, a 19th-century British explorer who made the *hajj* (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) by traveling by camel through some of the same deserts that Lehi’s family traveled, observed that among Bedouin women “the grown son has a tender regard toward his mother, . . . before the teeming love even of his fresh young wife” and could be depended on to welcome his mother as matron in his tent should something happen to her husband. This relationship may partially explain why Nephi spoke more of his mother than of his wife.

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Bedouin tents. The party’s collection of tents could not begin to replace a comfortable urban house.
Such strong family ties made the tragedy of losing a son especially traumatic—almost insurmountably devastating if a mother like Sariah were to lose all of her sons at one time. Centuries after Sariah’s time, but within a similar desert cultural tradition, Doughty encountered a woman who attempted to offer him an armful of fresh produce while pleading, “I have lost my children, one after another, four sons, and for the last I besought my Lord that He would leave me this child, but he died also . . . and he was come almost to manly age. And there are times when this sorrow so taketh me, that I fare like a madwoman; but tell me, O stranger, hast thou no counsel in this case? and as for me I do that which thou seest,—ministering to the wants of others—in hope that my Lord, at the last, will have mercy upon me.20

Coupled with this profound motherly love was Sariah’s knowledge of specific dangers awaiting her sons in Jerusalem. Many Jerusalem men holding positions of power had a vendetta against “the prophets” who vehemently warned against resistance to the Babylonians (see 1 Nephi 7:14–15).21 We can therefore understand some of Sariah’s fears when her sons did not return from Jerusalem in the time frame she anticipated. So again we ask, why did the Lord inspire Nephi to include this incident in his narrative? Obviously, Nephi’s intent was not to demean his mother, nor to lead readers to write her off as a faithless murmurer. I suggest a different explanation. To establish Lehi and his family in a new land where they would inspire and instruct later generations to come unto Christ, God needed more than a father and a son (as successor) to possess a testimony tried in the fire of affliction. God also needed a matriarch, weathered by her own trials of faith and armed with her own unwavering witness, to stand steadfast with her prophet–husband.

When her sons failed to return, Sariah feared, giving evidence that her present faith, though admirably strong, was not yet strong enough to continue the difficult journey, let alone to establish a God-fearing family in a new land. The content of 1 Nephi 5 is therefore especially significant because it shows how crucial a mother’s preparation is to the Lord. God desired not only that the family possess the brass plates for the journey, but also that both the mother and the father have unshakable faith before they continued.

In her fear, Sariah “complained against” her husband, calling him a “visionary man” and blaming him for leading their family to “perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:2). Lehi did not argue Sariah’s accusation but validated the force that propelled him to act in total faith. Lehi responded to his wife: “I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren” (1 Nephi 5:4; 19:20). He continued his witness, “I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:5). Nephi relates that “after this manner of language did my father, Lehi, comfort my mother, Sariah,” suggesting that this type of interchange occurred a number of times during the sons’ absence. But the fact that Sariah desired repeated reassurance indicates that Lehi’s powerful testimony, though comforting, was not enough to deal with the threat of the potential loss of her sons (see 1 Nephi 5:1, 3, 6).

Sariah must have begun to pray more fervently than ever before during her sons’ absence—not only for their safety but also for a confirmation that their journey was of great importance to the Lord. One can imagine Sariah gazing longingly toward the horizon several times a day, hoping for some sign of her sons’ return, all the while pleading with God.

Nephi gives us a glimpse of the emotional reunion with his parents when he and his brothers returned from Jerusalem. “And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father, behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us” (1 Nephi 5:1). Doughty described a similar return of a son to his mother:

A poor old Beduin wife, when she heard that her son was come again, had followed him over the hot sand hither; now she stood to await him, faintly leaning upon a stake of the beyt. . . . [After giving his report to the men in the camp], he stepped abroad to greet his mother, who ran, and cast her weak arms about his manly neck, trembling for age and tenderness, to see him alive again and sound; and kissing him she could not speak, but uttered little cries. Some of the
[men] laughed roughly, and mocked her drivel ing, but [one man] said, "Wherefore laugh? is not this the love of a mother?"²²

Sariah’s reunion with her sons was additionally charged with the spiritual witness and stronger faith she received as a result of her trial. At that moment Sariah gained a deeper testimony than she had previously known. Notice the power and assurance in

Sariah’s expressions of faith continued, for Nephi added, “And after this manner of language did she speak” (1 Nephi 5:8). Sometime, either then or later, she or Lehi must have given an account of her crisis, including her fears while the sons were gone and how she complained to their father. Nephi was not personally present to witness Sariah’s fears, but he recorded her experience as among those “things which are pleasing unto God” (1 Nephi 6:5). Obviously Sariah’s witness communicated a vital truth to Nephi, one that carried a message for generations to follow. Furthermore, Sariah’s now firm personal testimony would bless Lehi. When periodic moments of discouragement pulled at his faith, Sariah could reaffirm God’s promises to him as Lehi had done for her during her crisis.

Appreciating Sariah’s epiphany also gives greater meaning to her subsequent act of sacrifice. “And it came to pass that they did rejoice exceedingly, and did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings unto the Lord; and they gave thanks unto the God of Israel” (1 Nephi 5:9). Notice that Nephi reported that “they” offered the sacrifice. Since Nephi was writing in first person, he tells us that he was not included as a primary participant in the ordinance. The context suggests that Lehi and Sariah together performed this sacred act of worship. One can feel the renewed personal commitment that Sariah reverently placed on the altar alongside the animal sacrifice. And—most important—there is no indication that Sariah ever murmured again.

The Arrival of Ishmael’s Family

God’s confirming witness came to Sariah before her sons returned to Jerusalem for Ishmael’s family. Sariah’s conversion would influence the other women who joined their camp. Clearly, many in the family had experienced a dramatic increase in faith as a result of fulfilling God’s command to obtain the brass plates. On the second return trip, the sons did not encounter opposition in the land of Jerusalem, nor did Sariah express fear over their absence.

The text is silent as to why Ishmael’s daughters were selected to be wives for Lehi and Sariah’s sons. Tradition among desert peoples was for a woman to marry her paternal uncle’s son. Consequently, there may have been some familial connection between Ishmael (or his wife) and either Lehi or Sariah. Elder Erastus Snow purported learning from Joseph Smith that Lehi’s daughters had married into Ishmael’s family already, connecting the two families before they ever left Jerusalem. Furthermore, the fortuitous fact that a precise number of eligible men were available to marry Ishmael’s five single daughters may have figured prominently in Ishmael’s decision...
Finally, Nephi tells us that the Lord softened Ishmael’s heart and also the hearts of those in his “household” to assist them in their decision to depart (see 1 Nephi 7:5). While again we marvel at the confidence with which a family left its comfortable city lifestyle to dwell in the desert in search of a new homeland, we note that not all members of Ishmael’s family were spiritually prepared for the mission God had called them to serve. During the journey back, a serious conflict erupted. Two opposing groups emerged, with women on both sides. Four women (two unmarried daughters of Ishmael and his two daughters-in-law) sided with Laman and Lemuel and Ishmael’s two married sons. The other four women in Ishmael’s family (his wife and three remaining unmarried daughters) sided with Nephi, Sam, and Ishmael (see 1 Nephi 7:6).

When their anger reached its climax, Laman and Lemuel bound Nephi and threatened his life. Nephi’s physical strength and fervent prayers loosened his bands but could not calm his brothers’ wrath. Rather, women in the company succeeded in softening the contentious brothers. Nephi reported that first a daughter of Ishmael, next Ishmael’s wife, and then one of Ishmael’s sons assuaged Laman and Lemuel’s anger. The order of those listed implies that the two women were the more effective in reestablishing peace and harmony (see 1 Nephi 7:19).

One scholar proposed that women succeeded in this incident because Semitic culture allowed men to save face when yielding to a woman’s pleas. While this may be the case, it underestimates the strength of a woman’s influence. Perhaps the success in calming Laman and Lemuel has more to do with women’s ability to replace contention and disunity with respect and tranquility among feuding men. Furthermore, we note that Ishmael’s daughter and wife had a voice in the affairs of the traveling company, and that voice carried weight. This is an important observation because it contradicts most reports of traditional women’s roles in related cultures. For example, Doughty found women were most often silent in desert family clans. He observed, “The women . . . live in the jealous tyranny of the hus-

bands. . . . Timid they are of speech, for dread of men’s quick reprehending.”

Since both families came from the same Israelite culture, one assumes that Sariah was regarded as the female “head of household,” supervising her new daughters-in-law and exerting significant influence for the women as a whole. That influence is particularly important when we remember Sariah’s newly strengthened faith. Her witness would be heard along with Lehi’s and Nephi’s and would bolster conviction and divine purpose (in both the men and the women) in the journey. Such an important voice would not be silenced in the camp, although Sariah is not cited again in the text.

Life in the Wilderness

The presence of converted, God-fearing family leaders did not erase the physical hardships of the company’s life in general and wilderness challenges in particular. “Sufferings” and “afflictions” are mentioned often in Nephi’s narrative. Bouts with severe hunger and thirst were paramount in their struggle to survive (see 1 Nephi 16:19, 21, 35). Doughty observed that “the Arabians inhabit a land of dearth and hunger” and that “many times between their waterings, there is not a pint of water left in the greatest sheykhs’ tents.” He also noted that when scant water was available, it was often unwholesome “lukewarm ground-water” or else infected with camel urine.

A staple in the desert traveler’s diet was the date, described as “too much of cloying sweet, not ministering enough of brawn and bone.” The menu had little if any variety and depended on goat milk,
desert mammals, and locusts toasted on hot coals and eaten with the heads removed. Doughty noticed starvation conditions particularly prevalent among women: “From spring months to spring months, nine months in the year, . . . most nomad women are languishing with hunger.”

While “wild beasts” threatened the safety of Lehi’s party (see 1 Nephi 7:16), they also provided a substantial source of food (see 1 Nephi 16:31). Described as a blessing from the Lord, wilderness meat was eaten raw because the Lord made it taste sweet to them (see 1 Nephi 17:2, 12). Citing a 19th-century explorer in Arabia, Nibley suggested the reason for eating uncooked meat was to reduce the need to build fires that would attract “roving marauders” to the rising smoke. The Lord explained that the reduced need for fires was also to teach Lehi’s party that he would be their “light in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:13). However, when considering the saga through women’s eyes, another rationale for calling raw meat a blessing becomes apparent. Without the necessity of cooking, women would have an obvious reduction in their workload. If for no other reason, being able to eat raw meat shows the Lord’s compassion for these women, whose heavy duties were eased by the elimination of cooking.

The family’s rate and mode of transportation also shed light on women’s life in the desert. Presumably, Lehi’s company used camels to carry their cumbersome gear and essential possessions as well as themselves. Traveling 20 to 25 miles a day, the capacity pace for laden camels, Lehi could have covered the distance between Jerusalem and suggested locations for Bountiful in weeks rather than eight years. The company would have camped for lengthy periods or was otherwise detained during the journey. To account for some of the added years of “sojourning,” S. Kent Brown has conjectured that Lehi’s family experienced periods of servitude or bondage among larger desert clans and that the family may have traded food and water for their freedom. Alma accounted for Lehi’s lost time in travel to “slothfulness” on the part of some in the party who “forgot to exercise their faith and diligence” (Alma 37:41–42).

Perhaps longer periods of camping and resting occurred during the women’s advanced stages of pregnancy and subsequent childbirth. Nephi recorded that the women, including Sariah, gave birth to one or more children during their eight years in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 17:1; 18:7). Doughty described the desert birthing bed as “a mantle or tent-cloth spread upon the earth.” Older women among the clan typically assisted the mother by taking her away from the camp, “apart in the wilderness,” to be delivered.

In addition to their duty to carry, deliver, and nourish children, desert women assumed a daunting list of other responsibilities. They collected water, gathered firewood, churned butter, guarded flocks, prepared meals, spun yarn from which mantles were woven to keep the family warm, braided palm matting that covered tent floors, and wove and repaired cords used to secure the tents. Most remarkable, it was considered women’s work to take tents down, load tents and supplies on camels, ensure the security of the children and supplies during transport, and set up tents again when a new campsite was reached. Most tents were made of black goatskins, making them significantly heavy. Doughty described the scene as a Bedouin clan set up a new camp:

The housewives spread the tent-cloths, taking out the corner and side-cords; and finding some wild stone for a hammer, they beat down their tent pegs into the ground, and under-setting the tent-stakes (“pillars” (amidàn) they heave and stretch the tent-cloth: and now their booths are standing. The wife enters, and when she has bestowed her stuff [unloading all the supplies], she brings forth the man’s breakfast. . . . After that she sits

The smaller the nomad camp, the more vulnerable and more fearful they would be (compare 1 Nephi 17:13).
within, rocking upon her knees the semíla or sour milk-skin, to make this day’s butter.⁴⁰

No wonder George Reynolds and Janne Sjodahl observed in their commentary on Lehi’s sojourn in the wilderness that “the wives were not an encumbrance on the road, but [the group’s] greatest help.”⁴¹

The more one considers the rigors of desert living, the more one understands why there was murmuring and even open complaining in Lehi’s company. They were, after all, mostly urban in their tastes. Nephi reported that most of the men “murmured exceedingly” because of their afflictions, namely Laman and Lemuel and the two sons of Ishmael; “and also my father began to murmur against the Lord his God” (1 Nephi 16:20). The daughters of Ishmael also joined in murmuring after their father died in the wilderness: “Our father is dead; yea, and we have wandered much in the wilderness, and we have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue” (1 Nephi 16:35). Conspicuously absent in this list of “murmurers” is Sariah. More firm than the valley of Lemuel or the pegs that supported desert tents, Sariah’s faith was a significant anchor.

Perhaps it was Sariah’s unwavering testimony coupled with Nephi’s teachings that led each of these women, like Nephi, to be “desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him” (1 Nephi 10:17). For after the trial of their faith, Nephi gave these women the sublime compliment from a male perspective: “our women . . . were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and they began to bear their journeyings without murmurings” (1 Nephi 17:2). Thereafter, when complaints were voiced, they were from Nephi’s brothers, and then, not for their own afflictions but for the trials the women suffered: “Our women have toiled, being big with child; and they have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions” (1 Nephi 17:20). This statement implies that the women suffered greater hardships than the men did, but whined less after the strengthening of their faith.

Furthermore, Nephi allowed the men’s complaints in behalf of the women to stand. The message inferred is that if these women, who had been wrenched from a relatively comfortable urban life, could become strong through their extreme afflictions, then so can you and I. Paul taught the same correlation between hardships and developing faith: “God having provided some better things for them through their sufferings, for without sufferings they could not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:40 JST). And Nephi echoes: “And thus we see . . . if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them” (1 Nephi 17:3). Nephi used the women’s faithful example to teach us that lesson.

Conclusion

Nephi’s record of the women in 1 Nephi communicates much about the need to seek and receive one’s own witness of truth. Furthermore, the Lehite women’s experiences evidence the role of adversity in achieving such a testimony. In many ways, women in Lehi’s company form a parallel to heroic and faithful pioneer women who left comfortable homes in both Nauvoo and faraway lands to “gather to Zion.” During the 19th century, scores of these women
trekked across a harsh and dangerous wasteland, intent on establishing a home where a people would commit to follow God at all hazards. Once they arrived in the Salt Lake valley, they continued to take an active role in both private and public spheres. Their voices, combined with those of their brothers, forged a society that increasingly influenced those who desire to know God.

Bryant S. Hinckley, father of President Gordon B. Hinckley, recognized the essential influence of women in every aspect of society. Although he referred directly to pioneer women, the same could be said of the women in 1 Nephi:

Our pioneer mothers carried with them into the remotest corner of this commonwealth the spirit of the home and the culture of the race. There is no role of life where women do not take their place and play their part with heroism and courage. There is no place where man goes, no matter how hard or far, that she does not follow, and that to bless and cheer his abode. . . . In counsels and in assemblies she is there to consider and promote the well-being of mankind with instinct and inspiration superior to the reason of man. But there is no other place where she fits more perfectly and contributes more completely than in that haven we call home.42

Equality of the sexes, without duplicating each other’s responsibilities, is further acknowledged in the wilderness saga of 1 Nephi. Women were neither superior nor inferior to men, but contributed female strengths that complemented men’s talents, making everyone stronger. In context, we see that the women’s God-given capacity, both physical and spiritual, enabled them to accomplish whatever the Lord required. Nephi issues the same assurance to anyone who desires similar strength: “For he that diligently seeketh [the Lord] shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come” (1 Nephi 10:19; see also Alma 32:23). While cultural lenses may cloud the clarity and hide the deeper meaning of truth, to those willing to listen, God speaks through prophets who boldly proclaim that “he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . and all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33).
ENDNOTES

Desert Epiphany: Sariah and the Women in 1 Nephi
Camille Franken


2. Two months after the 1978 revelation on priesthood ordination, Elder Bruce R. McConkie quoted 2 Nephi 26:33 and gave the following commentary: “These words have now taken on a new meaning. We have caught a new vision of their true significance. . . . Since the Lord gave this revelation on the priesthood, our understanding of many passages has expanded. Many of us never imagined or supposed that they had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have today” (In Charge to Religious Educators, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982], 152).


4. See Moses 1:19, note 182.

5. See Doughty, Travels, 278–79.


7. Doughty, Travels, 570.


10. See Phillips, Unknown Oman; 218, Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 40.


13. See Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 70.


15. Ibid., 190, 259.


17. See ibid., 318; Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 53.

18. Doughty, Travels, 278–79.


26. See ibid., 130, 131; Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 53.


29. Smith, Early History of God, 89.


32. Smith, Early History of God, 19; compare Smith, Olyan, Asherah, and the Cult of Yahweh, 74.

33. Olyan, Asherah, and the Cult of Yahweh, 29, 33, 74.


