

THE DESERT CROSSING



CROSSING THE DESERT would be a terribly stressful thing. You're constantly trying to survive traveling well over a thousand miles either on camelback or on foot. When you have ridden on camelback you know that it is not actually the most comfortable thing in the world. So you would be tired a lot of the time and possibly malnourished and thirsty.

The heat is terrible, we can hardly imagine it. To be in it all day and all night with no escape, constantly sapping your strength and dehydrating—it is a truly terrible thing. And the temperatures rise to very high levels in the desert.

The lack of water is always a threat because watering holes are in some cases several days apart. If you're even ten degrees off and you miss a watering hole, you could



Sand packed against a mountain south of Marib.

be in serious jeopardy of dying. It happens all the time. One of the worst fears even of the Bedouins who know the area quite well is that they'll miss out on water and be in the desert without anything to drink.

Daniel Peterson



David J. Johnson.

They would have been going through a region that was entirely tribal, where there was no law, no control by any government or state.

David Johnson

There's a very real danger of being under attack because you're trespassing on someone's territory. The watering holes, for example, often belong to particular tribes. At the least they would want to charge someone who wanted to drink from their well. Or they might not let you drink at all. In any event, you had to negotiate in some cases. There's a wonderful scene at the beginning of the movie, *Lawrence of Arabia*, where somebody is taking water from another tribe's well. Lawrence's guide is shot dead because he's drinking from a well that belongs to a tribe to which he does not belong. This is not fiction, this is the way it really is. Some of these tribes lived in a state of perpetual warfare with one another. It wasn't always open warfare, but it was always ready to break out. And if you

don't belong to a tribe, you're just an intruder coming through the area—then you may have no allies at all. The local tribe is looking at you and thinking, “camels, goods, women,” whatever it is they want, and you're a relatively small group—a very insecure situation to be in.



When we think of a trail, we tend to think of something civilized—a clear little path through the woods. The Incense Trail covered very broad areas in the middle of nowhere. And so people traveling with any kind of goods and camels would themselves be judged goods and were therefore vulnerable. Camels were a very important commodity in pre-Islamic Arabia. If nothing else they could be eaten; people ate camels.

Everything that Lehi and his group would have had,



would have been valuable to a group of people living in a very remote area that was totally lawless. There simply was no law out there. Especially if you're traveling without any kind of tribal protection. The one thing that kept order was the ability to extract vengeance. But



Lehi didn't represent a tribe; there would be no one to avenge his death if anything happened to him. He was as vulnerable as could be. You have to slip through here as unobtrusively as you possibly can. And so they don't even build fires. They're trying to go unnoticed.

Daniel Peterson

A small group like his may have been subject to being taken captive and becoming slaves. They were of different religious faith obviously than the people that

were there, and so they would have been looked upon as foreigners who would have been fair game.

David Johnson

When Nephi is explaining how proud he is of the travelers, particularly the women, he describes how now they're able to eat raw meat. And it is sweet to them, he says—sweet to them! Only God could do that.

Ann Madsen

“What will we have for breakfast this morning?”
Answer: raw meat (1 Nephi 17:2).

Truman Madsen

The Liahona becomes their guide. They've left the incense trail, and now they're on their own. Going through what is called now the Empty Quarter. When you combined the heat of the desert with the wind that would bring a sandstorm, I can't imagine anything that would be more stressful, more difficult to deal with, as you curled up next to a camel with your cloak over your face and tried to wait it out.

Ann Madsen

You'll deal with the threat of sands which can cover or even kill anyone; when they come, they come very strongly.

Yusuf Abdullah





The reality of an environment that is always there, always hostile, is something that is so hard for the modern reader to appreciate. But it constituted the basic reality with which Nephi and his family struggled day after day.

Noel Reynolds

We often say it is darkest just before the dawn; we sometimes think that some of our greatest blessings come after some of our most difficult trials. This was exactly what happened at the end of this desert journey.

Ann Madsen

I guess the most difficult part of life isn't meeting the crises—the huge dramatic events—it is the daily grind that you can't see coming to an end. Probably the hardest part of the journey was that—day after day, not knowing if it is going to end in a good way, and it just goes on; they can't cook their meat, and the bickering probably continued. That's the refiner's fire for all of us. And that's probably where the character of Nephi, Sam, Jacob, Joseph, Lehi, and Sariah were burnished. And that's where all of us show our mettle.

Virginia Pearce

Given the conditions that we know exist in the deserts of Arabia, and given their point of view, one cannot blame in a way members of the family who came through here and saw nothing but heat, sand, flies, scorpions. It is only with the eye of faith, the eye



Far left: Wadi Rum.

of testimony that a person could go through this sort of experience, survive it, and come out a better person.

This desert crossing was a furnace of afflictions, which made them humble. I think that this was the place which tried the souls of people and proved them, whether they were on the Lord's side or not. Some of the members of the family did fine. They were proud people from Jerusalem, Israelites, members of God's people, but they swallowed their pride, accepted what the Lord offered them and went on. There were others who couldn't, wouldn't, and for them this must have been a horrific trial. Yet for those who would pass the test, God had formed them in His crucible, had shaped them and molded them so that they were ready to begin another people of God.

Kent Brown

MEETING PEOPLE ON THE JOURNEY

One of the most intriguing geographical notes that Nephi makes in his narrative of the movement of his family through this part of the world has to do with the name Nahom, but it also has to do with the eastward turn. It seems as though Nephi's note about the eastward turn tells us (1) that his family is traveling along or shadowing the Incense Trail and (2) that he knew about this key turn.

From the Nahom tribal area eastward, the family will run into Marib. That's where they'll come, that's where all the roads are going. And they would come to this grand city. In antiquity, Marib was one of the most important cities in the world.

This was one of the most important stops on the fabled Incense Trail. Marib also became the city of one of the most famous temples known in the ancient world, the so-called Mahram Bilqis, named after the legendary Queen of Sheba.

Kent Brown



William J. Hamblin.

When they were far away from Jerusalem, when they were not afraid of being pursued, and thought they were safe from the political situation in Jerusalem; they wouldn't have felt so wary of having human interactions with people there, in fact they would have welcomed it. So my bet is that they probably did go into the towns to seek supplies.

Daniel Peterson

It's interesting that we don't find accounts of Lehi interacting with anybody in Arabia. We do however find accounts of him knowing names of certain places. That implies they interacted with other people who told them what the name of the place was.

William Hamblin





