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Refining the Spotlight on Lehi and Sariah

S. Kent Brown


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Brown uses clues from the Book of Mormon account of Lehi’s journey to piece together aspects of the party’s travels. He gives a possible timetable for various parts of the eight-year journey through the desert. In contrast to other researchers’ proposals, Brown believes that since Nephi first mentions childbirth in conjunction with events at Nahom, the group may have stayed in the Valley of Lemuel for only a few months and the subsequent trip to Nahom could not have taken longer than two years. The family would then have spent at least six years along the shorter eastward leg. This fact, he argues, along with hints from the Book of Mormon, may indicate that the party’s travel was repeatedly delayed by hostile tribes and even indentured servitude or bondage before reaching the southern seacoast of modern Oman. While the author does not advocate a particular candidate for Bountiful, he acknowledges that the geographic features of the general area, including the presence of iron ore, fit with Nephi’s own description.
With steady, measured steps, students of the Book of Mormon have been pacing off a tangible framework for the journey of Lehi and Sariah through the Arabian Peninsula. Framed against endless white sands and dark craggy mountains, the spare yet sometimes vivid account of these two people leading their small group through one of the harshest climes on earth—Lehi as prophet-leader, Sariah as director of the camp¹—invites efforts to probe more deeply their world saturated by heat, dust, and seas of patinated rocks. Because some anchoring geographical details from their journey have emerged through recent study (the locations of their first camp, of Nahom and the eastward turn, and of the general area where the trek ended), the present challenge is whether, from ancient and modern sources, we can reliably sketch a picture of the 2,200-mile desert trek from Jerusalem to their Bountiful where Nephi built his oceangoing ship.²

S. Kent Brown
One initial observation is important, though perhaps obvious. In his narrative of the long trek from the first camp to Bountiful, Nephi was highly selective. He chose to feature only three significant episodes, rolling them tightly one after the other: the marriages (see 1 Nephi 16:7), the hunger crisis at the place of the broken bow (see 16:17–32), and the group’s rupture following the death of Ishmael (see 16:34–39). What do we understand from Nephi’s narrative choices? Initially, they mean that Nephi’s focus does not rest on the daily minutiae of the journey. Instead, he bends light onto the moments that significantly shaped not only the rest of the desert journey but also the distant future of the group, including its permanent splintering after reaching the New World. The day-to-day matters he leaves in the rhythms of his memory, only occasionally allowing them to sound in his report: “we traveled for the space of four days,” “we did take our bows and our arrows,” “we did pitch our tents again,” “we did sojourn in the wilderness” (16:13, 14, 33; 17:3). However, we must not fall under the spell of the faint humdrum that beats throughout Nephi’s account and assume that he is voicing little. By listening and peering, we find reward.

From Jerusalem

The first pressing question ties to the route by which Lehi, Sariah, and their four sons departed Jerusalem. A number of established routes lay open to them. It is important to settle that none of the routes would have carried them south along the shorelines of the Dead Sea, except along the western shoreline from the Ein Gedi oasis south. At points along both the east and west sides of the Dead Sea, the terrain slopes precipitously from cliffs to water’s edge and would have blocked travelers and their pack animals.

Further, one should grant the probability that the family generally followed or shadowed a trade route not only for this segment of the journey but for later segments too. Such routes offered an infrastructure that supplied needed food, water, and a measure of safety. Nephi hints that family members ran into others as they traveled, an aspect of following a trade route.

Routes Southward

If family members walked south from Jerusalem toward Bethlehem, at least two routes lay open. One trade route led to Hebron, eventually bending southeast to Arad and down through the Zohar Valley into the Arabah Valley. This trail was the most direct to the tip of the eastern arm of the Red Sea, where the modern cities of Aqaba and Eilat now sit.

A second trail would have carried them south for a few miles, then eastward. Known as the “ascent of Ziz,” it connected the areas of Tekoa, birthplace of the prophet Amos, and Ein Gedi, an oasis that lay on the west shore of the Dead Sea (see 2 Chronicles 20:16 Revised Standard Version). From Tekoa, south and slightly east of Jerusalem, the trail descends through rugged country. At Ein Gedi the group could turn south toward the Red Sea, passing along the west shore of the Dead Sea.

East, Then South

Two other trails would have borne the family eastward, taking them down...
into the Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea. From either trail, the party would then have ascended into the highlands of Moab and turned south, following either the King’s Highway or a north–south road that ran farther east through Edomite territory. Of the two local routes from Jerusalem itself, the first departed from the east side of the city and skirted southward around the Mount of Olives, turning east and following the trade route that connected with the northwest shore of the Dead Sea through Wadi Mukallik (Nahal Og). In antiquity this trail was known as the “Route of Salt” because caravans used it to carry salt extracted from the Dead Sea up to Jerusalem. At any point after descending into the Jordan Valley, the family could have aimed for the mountains of Moab, perhaps reaching the King’s Highway near Mount Nebo.

The second, more northerly local route would also have carried the family from the east side of Jerusalem on an eastward track that ascended the Mount of Olives near the modern village of At-Tur and eventually led them down through Wadi Kelt. This path, too, carried trade goods between the Jordan Valley and Jerusalem. The family would have emerged from Wadi Kelt just south of Jericho. From there it was an easy trek across the Jordan Valley to the base of the mountains of Moab. Of all these possible routes, the most direct are those that run south. But it is impossible to know which one the family followed.

Surprisingly, Nephi introduces few notices of time in his story, perhaps because there was a timeless quality about it, because his story was one of creating a new people of God. The few chronological notations tie to important moments that are somehow tied to Jerusalem. The first reads “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah” (1 Nephi 1:4). If Nephi’s note matches Zedekiah’s accession to the throne and not a later ceremonial enthronement, the time is the spring of 597 BC and marks the beginning of Lehi’s ministry. The second chronological notice links both to time and ceremony: “when he [Lehi] had traveled three days in the wilderness” (2:6). The family had already reached the northeast tip of the Red Sea (see 2:5), and the specification of “three days” allows us to estimate how far the family walked from that point before putting up the first extended camp. The three days’ journey also represents a minimal distance from Jerusalem that a person had to travel before offering sacrifice away from the central sanctuary. The third chronological notation begins to measure time as the family moved farther from Jerusalem: “we traveled for the space of four days, . . . and we did pitch our tents again” (16:13). The accentuations of this passage rest
on the words *four days* and *again*. The four days are longer than the three days of 1 Nephi 2:6 and thus represent a clear break with the people’s Jerusalem-centered past. The term *again* lends a subtle touch that the group had now passed into a desert pattern of wind and sun and tents that would continue until they reached their Bountiful. Because these chronological notices all connect with Jerusalem, and life (see 1 Nephi 2:10, 14). The distance, incidentally, is relevant for estimating time at that spot. Young men, as Nephi and his siblings were, traveling on camels with little baggage could reach the city from that distance in four or five days. When the group covered that distance the first time, they took their tents, slowing them (see 1 Nephi 3:9). Authors have suggested various periods for the stay at the first camp: Lynn and Hope Hilton estimate from two to three years; Hugh Nibley gauges one to three years; George Potter and Richard Wellington suggest “for some time.”

I believe that a person has to give reasons for assigning any length of time at the camp. Were they gathering food by hunting or by tilling the ground? Early on, I surmise, Lehi had learned that he and his family were to push themselves farther into the desert. Hence, they would need as much food as possible for the journey. When the family of Ishmael joined the group, the need for food doubled, for there now were a number of teenagers and young adults who would consume much of the available food supply. The longer they camped, the more the group would have eaten. Moreover, Lehi carried the main batch of seeds specifically for planting in the promised land. He evidently planted none along the way, for after the group arrived in the promised land, Nephi recorded, “We did put *all our seeds* into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 18:24; see 8:1). There is also the matter of arable land where Lehi might plant seeds. Would not local people claim such ground? In my view, there are fewer problems if we assume that the family spent no more than a few months at the first camp, perhaps up to a year. All of the activities rehearsed by Nephi, particularly the two extended trips back to Jerusalem, could have taken place within a few months. Besides, if the family had camped for a long time within reasonable reach of Jerusalem, what would have prevented the unhappy older sons Laman and Lemuel from returning to Jerusalem? After all, they thought that leaving Jerusalem had been a foolish mistake (see 7:6–7; also 17:20–22).

I also believe that the party of Lehi and Sariah spent less than one year traveling to “the place which was called Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34). How so? The answer arises from clues in Nephi’s narrative, plus an appeal to the ancient author Strabo (ca. 64 BC–AD 19).
As published sources now show, the discovery of three votive altars at an ancient temple near Marib, Yemen, fixes the general location of Nahom. The extended family traveled about 1,400 miles to reach this area. The first 250 or so miles brought them to the first extended camp. The remaining 1,150 or so miles lay between the first camp and Nahom. They then traversed approximately 700 miles to their Bountiful (see 1 Nephi 17:5, 8). The total length of their land journey was about 2,200 miles from Jerusalem.

We can determine the time required to walk to Nahom from the first camp. As a comparison, we know of other groups—chiefly caravanners—who rode between south Arabia and destinations on the southeast coast of the Mediterranean, the reverse of the party’s journey. Such groups required only months to traverse those long distances. In another example from Strabo, a Roman military force of 10,000 took six months to march down the west side of Arabia in 25–24 BC, starting from a small port called Leucë Comē (probably modern ‘Aynūnah, Saudi Arabia), crossing the mountains, and finally besieging a city called Marsiaba (perhaps ancient Marib). Then, because the army had lost many soldiers due to tainted water and food, they marched back hastily, taking only two months to walk between 1,000 and 1,100 miles, one way.

Because the starting point for the Roman army—Leucë Comē—lies not far from the general area of Lehi’s first camp, the Romans’ trek almost matches that of the party of Lehi and Sariah from their first camp in terms of both distance and general route.

A clue in Nephi’s narrative indicates that Lehi’s party likewise took no longer than a year to reach Nahom. It is the marriages (see 1 Nephi 16:7). While we cannot be certain how long after the marriages the party stepped off from the camp, we expect that one or more of the five new brides became pregnant within the first months of marriage. If so, we should expect a report of childbirth. And we find it. Nephi presents the first births of children as he closes his record of events at Nahom, not before (see 17:1). Thus it appears that the women gave birth to their first children there, and therefore the journey from the camp to Nahom took less than a year, matching the new brides’ pregnancies. Thus the Book of Mormon report matches roughly what we know from an ancient account of soldiers trudging over similar ground.

To this point, it appears to me that the family remained at the first camp for only a few months, a year at most. In addition, the journey from that camp to Nahom took up to a year. On this view, at most only two years of the eight had passed by the time the party arrived at Nahom, where they may have remained for a period of weeks. We do not know. Of events there, Nephi drapes another crisis in few yet revealing words—“the Lord did bless us again with food, that we did not perish” (1 Nephi 16:39)—disclosing that party members had faced starvation. Nephi holds that it was the Lord’s mercy that rescued them, at least in the short run. If they indeed remained at Nahom for a season, we have to suggest how they met their need for food. The possibilities include purchasing needed stores, farming, or working for others. It seems certain that
they would not have traded pack animals for food. Farming would mean finding land that local people did not want, and it would mean planting seed that they were carrying or were willing to purchase. But Lehi carried all his seeds to the New World, as we have seen, an act of unparalleled faith on his part because by this point he and his family had faced starvation twice and he could have solved both crises by opening the bags of seed.

If they bartered for needed supplies, what would they trade? Nephi insists that his father abandoned “his gold, and his silver, and his precious things” upon departing Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:4). While Ishmael’s family must have brought supplies with them, perhaps what Nephi calls “our provisions” (16:11), such provisions did not bear them past the starvation crisis of the broken bow (see 16:18–32). Individuals in the party may have contributed to the purchasing power of all. Indeed, both Ishmael’s wife and Sariah would have been carrying a certain amount of jewelry that each received at marriage, as was customary. It would have been an act of faith for them to part with such personal, precious gifts so that all might survive.

The possibility that party members worked for others is high. In my opinion, facing starvation twice before starting the eastward journey hints strongly that family members by now could not avoid seeking assistance from tribesmen in exchange for services, even if this led to severe difficulties either during the period of such services or when the family tried to move on. Might this activity have begun in Nahom? Perhaps. They needed food, water, and—eventually, in my view—protection. And a few pieces of jewelry would not have gone far in supplying the needs of almost 20 adults, including nursing mothers.

As they moved eastward from Nahom, they moved away from caravan routes and ventured into territory controlled by warring tribes, as studies have shown. Because southern Arabia has been known for the last 2,000 years as a place of inhospitable tribes and slave trafficking, we reasonably assume that it was so in Lehi’s time. Modern explorers have learned about the hazards of crossing from one tribal area into another. The system—and it is a loose system—is called rabi’a or rafiq. It means that travelers must be accompanied by a member of a tribe (or an authorized intermediary) while they are moving through the tribe’s territory. This is the only way that they are guaranteed safety. This also means bargaining with tribal leaders for safe passage and paying the agreed price for such protection and other services. However, when travelers reach the tribe’s boundary, they have to negotiate with the leaders of the next tribe, again paying an agreed price. The member of the first tribe generally cannot represent the interests of the second tribe. Hence, travel is precarious at best.

One can imagine that it is also most difficult for family members to extract themselves from prickly situations with self-interested tribesmen, even if the family has fulfilled its agreements.

This endlessly nettlesome situation, referred to elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, seems to lie behind language about the trek such as “enemies” (Omni 1:6; Alma 9:10), “battle” and “bondage” (Alma 9:22), and being “smitten with . . . sore afflictions” (Mosiah 1:17). If, of the eight years in the wilderness, only two had passed when the party reached Nahom, do the records themselves say that the party spent a disproportionate amount of time crossing the last 700 miles from Nahom, where they began to “travel nearly eastward” until they reached “the sea” (1 Nephi 17:1, 5)? Five important observations serve as keys for understanding the timetable of Lehi’s trek.

Nephi hands us the first informational key, which turns with the verb to sojourn. He 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 17:1–4). In the Bible, the term to sojourn regularly refers to servile relationships. Studies have shown that Nephi models the story of his party on the story of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. Hence, it is natural to interpret the term sojourn in Nephi’s narrative in the same way that it is used in the Exodus account: placing oneself under another person’s influence or authority by selling one’s services. In the best of situations, one becomes the employee of another. In the worst of cases, one becomes the slave or property of another so that one’s freedom has to be wrested by purchase or by escape. To be sure, Nephi’s choice of the verb to sojourn mirrors one Old Testament meaning, that of a refugee enjoying the protection of God. On another level, to sojourn may call up the biblical sense of a stranger or refugee living under the
protection of another person. Each of these senses shares in the notion of overlord and underling, pointing clearly to servility.

In this connection, we capture the following from Nephi’s compact yet intense record: “we did . . . wade through much affliction”; “our women did bear children in the wilderness”; “our women have toiled, being big with child”; “it would have been better that [our women] had died” (1 Nephi 17:1, 20). Do undocumented challenges lie within these lines? It seems obvious.

A second key, largely circumstantial, comes from Lehi. When he blessed his youngest son Joseph, he called the years of his family’s sojourn in the wilderness “the wilderness of mine affliction” and “the days of my greatest sorrow” (2 Nephi 3:1). For Lehi, it was the worst of times. Why? Although Lehi was well equipped for desert travel and thus must have known the rigors of living in such a clime, there evidently was an event—or series of events—that had soured him. As support, other indicators point to such an occurrence or situation.

When Lehi speaks to his children and grandchildren just before his death, he lifts to view the clashing concepts of captivity and freedom. In language that recalls slavery, he pleads that his sons “shake off the awful chains” by which they “are carried away captive,” being “led according to the . . . captivity of the devil” (2 Nephi 1:13, 18). He then urges them to “shave off the chains . . . and arise from the dust” (1:23). Further, Lehi’s whole concern with “redemption . . . through the Holy Messiah . . . to answer the ends of the law” borrows language from the freeing of slaves (2:6–7), declaring that the Messiah is to “redeem the children of men,” making them “free forever,” terminology associated with ending servility (2:26). One naturally asks, does not the force of these concepts gather strength at least partly from Lehi’s shared experiences with his children? In light of what we have so far reviewed, the answer seems to be yes.

A third key comes forward in recollections of King Benjamin (as abridged by Mormon), who knew the full story of the desert journey. Modern readers of the Book of Mormon are able to read only a very abbreviated record of the trek. As recent studies have shown, the fuller record was preserved elsewhere. In Mormon’s words, 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 would have brought more intense troubles since they were leaving areas of population, cultivation, and moderate control of law. It was also a place of little water. We know of no specific instances of the family not progressing in their journey on the way to Nahom, except for stopping because of Nephi’s broken bow (see 1 Nephi 16:17–32). Further, at no time in his narrative of the trek from the first camp to Nahom did Nephi write of being “driven back” or suffering from a lack of water. Whatever King Benjamin or Mormon had in mind, the incident (or incidents) seems not to have been a part of the trip to Nahom.

Turning to Alma the Younger, we find a fourth key because, like Benjamin, he knew the full story. Alma recalled the kindnesses of God to Lehi and his family in the desert: “[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 of the generations from Lehi to his own. In my reading, Alma is saying that
Lehi’s generation had also experienced “bondage and captivity.” A compelling point has to do with the parallelism set up by the prior verse, wherein Alma notes in almost identical language that the Lord had “delivered [our fathers] out of bondage and captivity from time to time,” pointing to “our fathers [in] Egypt” (Alma 36:28). Thus the phrase “from time to time” that appears in both verses 28 and 29 strengthens the observation that, as the Hebrew slaves, so the generation of Lehi had suffered “bondage and captivity.” We read:

[God] has brought our fathers out of Egypt, . . . and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time. (Alma 36:28)

[God] has also brought our fathers out of . . . Jerusalem; and he has also . . . delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time. (Alma 36:29)

In another reminiscence, Alma recounted that “our father, Lehi, was brought out of Jerusalem by the hand of God . . . through the wilderness.” Immediately thereafter Alma asked: “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? How might 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 cinches down the possibility that Lehi, too, had experienced troubles with “enemies.” In fact, 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 (see 1 Nephi 16:37; 17:44) and three times to kill the younger son Nephi (see 1 Nephi 7:16; 16:37; 2 Nephi 5:3–4).38

In this same speech, Alma declared that these Nephite ancestors, who were brought “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 more than Lehi’s party because he also spoke of those “brought out of bondage time after time . . . until now” (9:22). But the fact that the events of Lehi’s generation had triggered such reminiscences—the verb to bring out characterizes both the Israelite exodus and that of Lehi and Sariah”—illuminates the likelihood that references to physical difficulties, such as “sickness” and “diseases,” as well as to “enemies” and to “battle,” point to hardships experienced in Arabia, given the lack of food, water, and fuel and the menacing presence of unfriendly tribesmen.41

The fifth and final key turns in the hands of Isaiah. Nephi’s addition of Isaiah 48–49 to the end of his first book (see 1 Nephi 20–21) has to do with his conviction that Isaiah spoke about his family’s experiences. Indeed, Nephi says that the Lord showed “unto many [prophets] concerning us” (1 Nephi 19:21), a statement made after summarizing his family’s journey to the land of promise and just before introducing these chapters from Isaiah. In a word, Nephi is saying, “Isaiah knew about us.” As an example—and this point is important—Isaiah’s words 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; compare Isaiah 49:1)43
Obviously, Isaiah had anticipated a time when corrupt officials would rule the city, a situation that Lehi experienced. And it seems evident that Nephi had seen the relevance of such passages to the family’s situation. Without multiplying examples, we note compelling allusions to servitude in the desert. The reference to “children” born while one is “a captive” (1 Nephi 21:21; compare 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 will “defer [his] anger . . . that [he] cut [him] not off” could apply not only to Nephi’s older brothers but also to a desert tribesman to whom Lehi’s family owed temporary allegiance (1 Nephi 20:8–9; compare Isaiah 48:8–9). We also include reference to those whom the Lord looses from prison and darkness, whom he “shall feed in the ways” because the Lord “will . . . not forget [them] because he has graven [them] upon the palms of [his] hands” (1 Nephi 21:9, 15–16; compare Isaiah 49:9, 15–16).

At this juncture, we might venture a tentative reconstruction based on these five keys. 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. For they entered a region, particularly east of Shabwah, beset with tribal rivalries. The labor was hard on all, particularly the women—“our women have toiled . . . and suffered all things, save it were death” (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. In my view, such difficulties arose during the eastward portion of the trek from Nahom onward because Nephi offers no hint of such experiences during the trip to Nahom.

Directions

Nephi’s notations about directions of travel—“nearly a south-southeast direction” (1 Nephi 16:13) and “nearly eastward” (17:1)—offer opportunity to test his accuracy, at least for the south-southeast bearing of the party’s trek from the first camp to Nahom. We are now secure about the location of both places. Indeed, consulting a map tells us that when the group had reached Nahom, Nephi knew author’s proposed route for Lehi’s 2,200-mile journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful.
where he was vis-à-vis their starting place at the Valley of Lemuel, most likely Wadi Tayyib al-Ism. That portion of the journey ran generally in a south-southeasterly direction (see 16:13, 14, 33).

Naturally, this part of the trip did not proceed in a straight line. Nephi says as much: after the crisis of the broken bow, “we did again take our journey, traveling nearly the same course as in the beginning” (1 Nephi 16:33). For example, there are hints that the family passed through the al-Sarat mountain range, which runs along almost the entire west coast of the Arabian Peninsula and separates the coastal lowlands from the uplands of the interior. A limited number of passes and valleys offer access from one side of the range to the other. At some point the party had to cross the mountains before reaching Nahom, where the group turned “nearly eastward” (1 Nephi 16:34; 17:1). Otherwise, the mountains would have formed a major barrier to their eastward trek.

The first hint is the amazing initial success of the hunters in the party. After leaving “Shazer,” which lay four days’ journey from their first camp (see 1 Nephi 16:13), they traveled “for the space of many days, slaying food by the way” (16:15), suggesting abundant cover for hunters in mountainous terrain.

A second clue has to do with the place that they called Shazer. Nephi reports that the party stopped specifically to rest and hunt at Shazer after traveling “four days.” Shazer lay in “nearly a south-southeast direction” from the first camp (see 1 Nephi 16:13–14). Traveling this general direction would have initially kept the group near the shore of the Red Sea. But after the family left Shazer, Nephi mentions the Red Sea for the last time (see 16:14), pointing to the likelihood that the family soon traveled into the mountains.

A third clue has to do with “the most fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:14). Such areas did not lie along the coastal plain immediately south of the base camp, because that region does not support much plant life. Hence, large numbers of wild animals would have been absent. Such “fertile parts” may have lain in the mountains, perhaps in a season of rain, or were more probably the oases on the eastern side of the mountain range. Thus, from hints in Nephi’s narrative, it seems that the family went into the mountains not long after leaving Shazer.

Nephi’s directional notation “south-southeast” therefore seems to carry two senses: (1) a general direction, with adjustments; (2) a direction from beginning point to ending point. In this light, we turn to Nephi’s expression “nearly eastward from that time forth” (1 Nephi 17:1). It seems to me that a person should read Nephi’s two directional notations similarly: the “eastward” bearing carries a general sense of direction, allowing adjustments, and represents the locations of Nahom on the west and Bountiful on the east, relative to each other.
What does this mean for understanding the eastward part of the journey? It is possible, of course, that the party traveled more or less in a straight line from Nahom to Bountiful. A person can skirt the northern edge of the dunes of the Ramlat as-Sab’atayn desert, reaching the upper Wadi Hadramaut, then continue across the al-Mahrah plateau to the coast. But then a traveler would face the problems of water and potentially hostile tribes. If a person trudges eastward from the south side of Wadi Jawf, the locale of Nahom, the first well is 150 miles distant. If the family swung farther north, the wells at al-‘Abr lie farther away. In addition, the al-Mahrah plateau seemingly saw little caravan travel in antiquity largely because of the lack of water. It seems improbable that people carrying infants traveled for days on end (excluding the Sabbath) without water for themselves or their animals. To be sure, the aid of the Liahona was always available. Even so, they did not escape “hunger and thirst” and “famine,” chiefly—and significantly—“because of their transgressions” (Mosiah 1:17; Alma 9:22; 37:42).

We must also remember that the desert is not empty, though it may seem so. In addition, desert people passionately claim water sources, whether springs, wells, or seasonal pools. The commandment that Nephi’s party not make fire also implies that the family was traveling through areas at least lightly peopled by others who were hostile (see 1 Nephi 17:12). Hence, access to water sources, particularly on the eastward portion of the journey, was both a critical need, especially for those with children, and a challenge to provide. In my mind, it was more prudent for them to follow the incense trail as long as they could. From the Marib area, this route swung south and east, missing the dunes and rocky terrain of the Ramlat as-Sab’atayn desert, leading one through settlements in an eastward arc from Marib to Shabwah where wells were in place.

East of Shabwah, what would they have found? All paths were difficult. The al-Mahrah plateau is dangerously waterless. If they traveled as far north as al-‘Abr, turning eastward would have brought them into a desolate corridor where they could walk between the high dunes of the Empty Quarter on their north and the fractured tableland to their south. Here water was at a premium since in places it was eight days’ journey between wells. If we add to this picture the presence of combative tribesmen, the eastward journey was challenging indeed.

**Burial of Ishmael**

Nephi’s few words disclose only the general area of Ishmael’s burial, nothing more. We can infer that Ishmael died at Nahom, but he may have passed away beforehand. Nephi writes, “Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34). Several aspects of ancient life appear in this line. First, we know that it was common for family members or friends to carry the body of a deceased person back to the person’s homeland for burial. Although this was impossible in Ishmael’s case, it is possible that family members carried Ishmael’s remains for some distance to a suitable burial spot, if indeed he died before they reached Nahom. Second, mourning customs would have led Ishmael’s family to grieve for “many days” (Genesis 37:34; see 50:10; Daniel 10:2). Third, the deep intensity of mourning is visible: “the daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly, because of the loss of their father” (1 Nephi 16:35). I suspect that the intense, unsettling emotions that these young women experienced, including Nephi’s wife, came upon them not only because of the loss of their father but also because some were awaiting the births of their first children.
Several options for burying Ishmael were available. For many people then living in that region, burials occurred next to a shrine. But for most south Arabian people, burials were in large cemeteries. Several such cemeteries have been identified in south Arabia and surveyed in recent years, including one with thousands of burials at the eastern end of Wadi Nihm where it turns north and runs toward Wadi Jawf. Whether Ishmael’s final resting place was in such a spot, we cannot know. What we also do not know is whether the party had to pay a fee for the burial.

**Bountiful**

There can be no doubt that the party of Lehi and Sariah emerged from the desert at some point along the south coast of modern Oman. The 100-mile-long maritime plain is the only region in southern Arabia that fits Nephi’s portrait of “much fruit,” “wild honey,” and “timbers” (1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1). The summer monsoon rains turn the area into a Garden of Eden, enlivening an isolated ecosystem that is bounded on the north by the desert and on the south by the sea. Driven by southwest winds, clouds envelop the coastal plain in rain from June into September.

On the question of pinpointing Lehi’s encampment at Bountiful, I believe that we lack compelling evidence and therefore need to exhibit caution until more data come to light. At this point, all is circumstantial. To be specific, no one can prove that a foreign family moved onto any particular spot at one of the proposed sites for Bountiful in the early sixth century BC because (1) there is no inscriptive evidence of the presence of such a party, and (2) archaeology cannot prove that a certain person or persons ever inhabited an area without such written proof. Under the right circumstances, an archaeologist could show, for instance, that the architecture of an area changed significantly in a certain era or that there is evidence of a sudden change in customs, such as food production, which may indicate the presence of a new people. Even so, these indicators would not prove that the newcomers were Israelites from Jerusalem. That sort of conclusion is impossible without written materials that were left behind. If one wants an indication that this sort of effort is fraught with difficulties, all one has to do is read about archaeology in the Holy Land. Every archaeological “fact” that a few decades ago seemed to point to the arrival of the Israelites under Joshua in the 13th century BC has been disputed, including the reason for the site-wide burn layer at the Canaanite city of Hazor (north of the Sea of Galilee), which the Bible says was burned by Joshua and the Israelites (see Joshua 11).

Along the south coast of Oman, there are as many as a dozen inlet bays, any one of which could have served Nephi’s shipbuilding needs. Since antiquity, virtually all such bays have been partially silted in, both their beds and their
Some are better situated for building a ship away from the rush of the monsoon winds; at least one (Khor Rori) is deep and broad enough to allow Nephi and his brothers to learn to control the vessel before going to sea; others are close to timbered spots (see 1 Nephi 18:1); others lie near sources of ore; still others are near natural hunting grounds where the family could have found “meat from the wilderness” before boarding the ship (18:6). In all, the region presents a surprising abundance of resources that would have supported life for many.

That there would have been other people in the area is most likely. The abundance of game, fish, and fruit would have assured a constant presence of other clans. As a visual test, one has only to look at the well-worn, crisscrossing sheep and goat trails along the hillsides next to the seacoast to see that herdsmen and flocks have been here for millennia. In addition, an important archaeological survey has determined that people have been trading along that coast from as far east as India and as far west as the Red Sea since the third millennium BC. This indicates waterborne shipping. What is missing is clear evidence for a shipwright industry. Nephi presumably could have examined seagoing vessels that plied the coastal waters. But he may have been alone as a shipbuilder. The closest known shipbuilding centers were hundreds of miles to the west, in the Red Sea, and hundreds of miles to the north in the Persian Gulf.

To construct his ship, Nephi needed tools. One suspects that his party carried basic tools—axes, hammers, digging implements. But tools for shipbuilding were likely not among their possessions. Presumably people who lived along the shore owned tools for repairing boats. But most of the vessels that carried goods were apparently constructed from leather or consisted of hollowed-out logs. Hence, Nephi needed tools that were not readily available. But before that, he needed “ore . . . [to] make tools” (1 Nephi 17:9). Because the closest copper mines lie 700 miles to the north, they were beyond reach. He needed to find a source of ore close at hand. As was typical, Nephi prayed: “Lord, whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten . . . ? And . . . the Lord told me whither I should go” (17:9–10). Here we see no indication that Nephi traveled far. Ore was evidently nearby. And that is exactly the case. Geologists from Brigham Young University have come upon two adequate sources of iron ore very near the seacoast. Within a day or two, Nephi could have walked to one place or the other from any campsite along the coastline.

Conclusions

The reconstructions that I have set forth will differ chiefly in details from those of my distinguished friends who have given years of their lives to studying Lehi and Sariah. For me, those details spell a significant difference in interpreting the desert experience of these two people and their party. First, in a positive vein my investigation tells me that we can learn much from small indicators in the accounts. For instance, Book of Mormon authors besides Nephi appear to have preserved broad hints of what the party faced as they crossed Arabia. Second, in a negative vein my instincts tell me that one must use caution when trying to pinpoint locations where events occurred. For example, we cannot know exactly where Ishmael was buried, though we know the general region. In an important sense, of course, we agree that God led the party on an exodus that would be celebrated in story and song among their descendants for a thousand years. Fortunately for us, their saga is now known to the wider world and their experience enriches our experience.

MNHC, Oman, a Seafaring Nation, 20, 22.

Norbert Weismann, personal communications to authors, 17 May 2000.

See MNHC, Oman, a Seafaring Nation, 107–8. Solomon had a fleet of ships built to sail to Ophir. When they returned from their three-year round-trip journey, they brought peacocks, which are found in India, not Africa (The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary [1993], s.v. “peafowl”). The ships must have either been built in India or traded with merchants from India. The ships also returned carrying almug wood, a hardwood that was used in the construction of the temple and was presumably native to Dhofar but imported from India. It should be noted that almug (1 Kings 10:11, 12; spelled algum in 2 Chronicles 2:8; 9:10, 11) appears only in the plural form almuggim in the Hebrew, which biblical scholars have taken to mean that the wood was delivered in planks (see M. G. Easton, Easton’s Bible Dictionary [1897], s.v. “almug”; accessible online at www.ccel.org/e/easton/ebd/ebd/T0000100. html#T0000182).

As cited in Patai, Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times, 57.

Patai, Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times, 47.


See MNHC, Oman, a Seafaring Nation, 113.

Cotton was introduced in southern Arabia in antiquity, possibly as early as 4000 bc (see Zartis, The Land of Incense, 60).

See Huntingford, Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, chap. 32.


Ali al-Shahri took George Potter and 14 other Latter-day Saint members to the caves on 22 September 2006.

See MNHC, Oman, a Seafaring Nation, 146.

Frank Linehan, the Western Region Marine Surveyor for United States Maritime Administration, an authority on the performance and construction of deepwater sailing vessels, estimated that Nephi’s ship would have been a 100-ton vessel if it was 60–70 feet long (J. H. Kelso, Jr., Tuning, 107). The ship was 60–70 feet long and was approximately 60–70 feet in length. By way of comparison, Columbus’s Nina weighed between 50 and 60 tons and was approximately 60–70 feet long (José María Martínez-Hidalgo, Columbus’ Ships, ed. Howard I. Chapelle [Barre, MA: Barre Publishers, 1966], 93).

See MNHC, Oman, a Seafaring Nation, 146.

Patai, Israeli Seafaring in Ancient Times, 37–38.

There are a number of khors (inlets) in Dhofar. Khor Salalah is the third largest after Khor Rori and Khor al-Balid. Khor Salalah is a modern bird sanctuary. It is a large khor and appears quite deep, but it has, in common with all of the khors that open directly onto the beach, a relatively narrow opening, which would have made it difficult to guide a large ship through, not to mention the breakers. Dr. Jana Owen of UCLA was not able to dive in Khor Salalah because it is a protected area. Regarding its suitability as a port in Lehi’s time, she noted in a personal communication to the authors, “Possible but very small and we cannot be sure about the depth in antiquity” (personal communication, to the authors, 14 August 2000).

The khors, or inlet bays, include Kharfot, Raysut, Quran al-Kabere, Awqad, al-Balid, Dhaahiriz, Suli, Taqah, Rori, and Mirbat.

Jana Owen wrote of Raysut, “We believe from surface col-

lecion and the obvious suit-

ability of the area that there would have been an ancient dock area there” (personal communication to the authors, 14 August 2000). The harbor at Raysut faces east and so provided protection from the southwest monsoon, which blows in summer but provides no protection from the winter northeast monsoon.

See Hilton and Hilton, Discovering Lehi, 166.

The khor was associated with a city of the same name, which was built around the 10th century AD by Persian conquerors who moved the capital to al-Balid from Khor Rori, some 15 miles to the east. It would appear that the harbor was in use only much later than Lehi’s time. Owen states: “We believe that this harbor functioned around the turn of the Common Era. It is based on lithics and a small amount of ceramics” (Jana Owen, personal communication to the authors, 14 August 2000).


Frank Linehan, personal communications with the authors, June 1999.

Maurizio Tosi, “Early Maritime Cultures of the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean,” in Bahrain through the Ages, ed. Khalifa and Rice, 94.

Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, as quoted in MNHC, Oman, a Seafaring Nation, 26.

It is generally accepted that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon in 63 days, or about 8.5 pages per day. 1 Nephi, chapters 2 and 16–19, which cover the information about the journey, comprise fewer than 11 pages in total (see Richard L. Bushman, “The Recovery of the Book of Mormon,” in Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited, ed. Noel B. Reynolds [Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997], 23).

Refining the Spotlight on Lehi and Sariah

S. Kent Brown


4. It is hard, for instance, to understand a map that shows an ancient route running along the impassable west shore of the Dead Sea; see The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5/780 (map), but a more correct rendition on p. 784.

The family must have taken pack animals—very probably camels—to carry tents and other essentials (see 1 Nephi 2:4). The sections of the tents would have weighed more than 100 pounds each. But even camels cannot carry such burdens if they are underfed and poorly cared for (see Bertram Thomas, Arabia Felix [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932], 164–65). That camels were more suited to desert travel than other animals can be seen in the oft-mentioned remark of Ahmed Fakhry, who on a trip to Yemen from March to May 1947 traveled through southwestern Arabia with camels and mules: “It is impossible for laden mules...
to walk in that loose sand, and so we had to ride camels" (An Archaeological Journey to Yemen [Cairo: Government Press, 1952], 1:12). Charles M. Doughty adds that donkeys "must drink every second day" (Travels in Arabia Deserta, with an introduction by T. E. Lawrence [New York: Random House, 1936], 1:325).

6. The passive-voice expression "the place which was called Nahom" indicates that the family learned the name Nahom from others (see 1 Nephi 16:34). In addition, when family members were about 1,400 miles from home at Nahom, some knew that it was a place they had returned to (see 16:36), even though they had run out of food twice (see 16:17–19, 39). Further, Doctrine and Covenants 33:8 hints that Nephi may have preached to people in Arabia.

7. For information about the three trade routes that brought goods to Jerusalem from the south and the east, see M. Har-El, "The Route of Salt, Sugar and Balsam Caravans in the Judean Desert," Geographical 2/6 (1978): 549–56.

8. This route is favored by D. Kelly Ogden, "Answering the Lord's Call (1 Nephi 1–7)," in Studies in Scripture, Volume Seven: 1 Nephi to Alma 29, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 17–33, especially 23. Har-El also draws attention to this route that ascends from Ein Gedi ("Crossed the Salt"; 555) also "Israelite and Roman Roads in the Judean Desert," Israel Exploration Journal 17/1 [1967]: 18–25, especially 19 (map), 21, and 25.

9. For the routes running east from Jerusalem, see Har-El, "Route of Salt," 549–56. Nelson Glueck describes a series of forts that would have protected travelers on the eastern desert road, though they were not in use in Lehi's era (The Other Side of the Jordan [New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1940], 128–34). For the route of the King's Highway, see Barry J. Beitzel, "Roads and Highways (Pre-Roman)," Anchor Bible Dictionary, 5:779 and accompanying maps.

10. One further question begs for an answer. What about the so-called Lehi cave that lies southwest of Jerusalem? Might Lehi and Sarah, or their sons, have stopped there as they fled the city? It is highly unlikely. The fact that the cave was used as a burial chamber whose bones were found undisturbed stands against accepting it as a place of refuge. And the two inscribed ships on the wall of one chamber seem to have been created at an era later than Lehi's, therefore not hinting at the ocean crossing that lay ahead of the group. Moreover, the distance and direction are problems. The cave lies 20 miles from paths that would have taken the family to northwest Arabia. See LaMar C. Berrett, "The So-Called Lehi Cave," JBMS 8/1 (1999): 64–66. Lehi seems to have known where he was going before fleeing the city. On connections with Arabia, see my study "Jerusalem Connections to Arabia in 600 bc," in Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem, ed. John W. Welch, David Ralph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 625–46.


13. According to Charles Doughty, the riders of the dromedary or riding camel, without baggage, can make 130 miles in "three journeys," or days (Travels in Arabia Deserta, 1:169).


15. I initially suggested this abbreviated stay at the first camp in "A Case for Lehi's Bondage in Arabia," 206. If a person holds that Lehi stayed a long time at his first camp, how long before local people noticed that this family was hunting in other people's traditional hunting grounds? It does not do to say that no one else lived there. Studies have shown that northwest Arabia was substantially populated in antiquity. See Michael Lloyd Ingraham et al., "Saudi Arabian Comprehensive Survey Program: Preliminary Report on a Reconnaissance Survey of the Northwestern Province (With a Note on a Brief Survey of the Northern Province)," ATLAL: The Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology 5 (1401 AH / AD 1981): 59–84; and M. C. A. MacDonald, "Along the Red Sea," Civilization of the Ancient Near East, ed. Jack M. Sasson et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 2:1350.


18. Nigel Groom estimates that the entire trip by land from the Dhofar region of modern Oman to Gaza on the Mediterranean Sea covered about 2,100 miles (Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade [London: Longman Group Ltd., 1981], 213 [chart]). Proposing a slightly different route, the Hildons estimate a distance of 2,156 miles (Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, Discovering Lehi [Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996], 30).

19. According to Groom the entire trip from Dhofar in southern Oman to Gaza took no more than four months (see Frankincense and Myrrh, chart on p. 213). Walter W. Müller estimates that caravans starting from southwest Arabia (a different starting place) required at least two months to reach the Mediterranean area (see Werner Daum, ed., Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilization in Arabia Felix [Jnnsbruck: Pinguin-Verlag, 1987], 49–50).


21. Strabo, Geography 16.4.23–24; summarized briefly in Pliny, Natural History 6.32 (1610). Some scholars accept the identity of Marib with Strabo's Marisaba (see Groom's review in Frankincense and Myrrh, 75–76). Strabo writes that the Roman army broke off its siege at Marsiaba because of lack of water—a detail that would seem to argue against identifying Marib with Marisaba since the Marib dam, which stored water in its reservoir, would have been only a few kilometers away. However, its water was brackish and therefore not potable.

22. 'Ayūnāh lies only 30 or so miles south of al-Bad' oasis and 40 or so miles from Wadi Tayib al-ism. As Lehi's party, so the Romans would have crossed the desert and traveled south-southeast along the incense trail because there were wells and fodder.

23. This point was made by Camille Fronk, "Desert Epiphanies," 8 also The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, ed. George A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), s.v. "Marriage"; consult Genesis 24:22, 47; 53; Isaiah 61:10.

24. The complaint 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).

25. On the number of persons, see John L. Sorenson, "The Composition of Lehi's Family," in By Study and Also by
26. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, an anonymous work dated to about AD 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” (cited in Groom, Frankincense, 90, 93, 94, quoting the translation of W. H. Schoff). From the Islamic period, the Qur’an refers often to slaves, both in terms of booty (Sûrah 30.33-50) and in terms of manumission (e.g., Sûrah 4:82, 5:89). In modern times, Bertram Thomas spoke of slaves in the south of Oman in the 1920s and 1930s, noting the remarkable, continuing phenomenon that the entire Shahrara 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 the Arabian Peninsula” (Arabia Felix, 15, 22-35, 47). Thirty years later, Wendell Phillips wrote of the extreme difficulties of moving from one tribal area to another in southern Arabia because some tribes were living in a state of perpetual war with others (see his Unknown Oman [New York: David McKay, 1966], 230-31).

27. Currently, such tribal interests are not as intense as they were less than a century ago because of the long presence of the Soviet Union in southern Yemen. As an illustration of earlier tribal interests in this region, “[Harold] Ingram’s most notable achievement was to bring peace [in 1937] to an area [the Hadhramaut] whose social life, trade and agriculture had been bedevilled for centuries by tribal warfare.

28. See Wilfred Thesiger, Arabian Sands (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959), 155-56, 179-80; Eduard Glaser, My Journey through Arhab and Haithid, trans. David Warburton (Westbury, New York: American Institute for Yemeni Studies, 1993), 5; and Bertram Thomas, Alarms and Excursions in Arabia (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1931), 289-90. Thomas, in Arabia Felix, makes these typical observations: “lack of rain and the merciless heat of the Arabian desert permit of but scattered and semi-barbarous nomad societies, which are at such perpetual war that, even for themselves, life is insecure”; “Tribal tradition is one of anarchy—of long inter- necine strife”; “Instability is the chief characteristic of any regime in tribal Arabia”; “The land ever surges with tribal unrest” (xxviii, 9, 15, 36; see also 82-83, 149-50, 172-74).

29. I first assembled the evidence in “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” 205-17.

30. Although one cannot consult the original ancient text of the Book of Mormon from which Joseph Smith translated (Arabia Felix, 15, 22-35, 47), Thirty years later, Wendell Phillips wrote of the extreme difficulties of moving from one tribal area to another in southern Arabia because some tribes were living in a state of perpetual war with others (see his Unknown Oman [New York: David McKay, 1966], 230-31).

31. For other summaries in the Book of Mormon of Lehi’s journey through Arabia, as well as aspects of 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. This era is characterized 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 (see Mosiah 9:3; Alma 61:4; 62:37). The documentation for hostilities against people outside a person’s Arabian tribe is hefy. See, for instance, Thomas, Arabia Felix, 13, 15, 28, 32, 40, 47. For other references, see Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s ‘Trial,’” 126-21; and note 53 below.


33. Lehi’s meaning would not be that of one sense of the biblical noun sojourner (Hebrew ger), which in the later books of the Old Testament means “protected citizen,” because the family of Lehi seems not to have sought citizen- ship during its journey. See Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 2:448; and Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament, 1:309.

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

35. Lehi was equipped with “tents” and other means for desert living and was able to leave his home without delay (see, for example, 1 Nephi 2:4; 3:9; 16:12). See Nibley’s discussion in Lehi in the Desert, 46-49.

36. It is also important to note how Lehi 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).

37. For Lehi as author of the full account, see S. Kent Brown, “Lehi’s Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source,” BYU Studies 24/1 (Winter 1984): 19-42; and Brown, From Jerusalem to Zarahemla, 28-37.

38. Omri 1:6 also mentions “enemies.”

39. For the Israeliite exodus, see Daube, Exodus Pattern in the Bible, 24, 31-34; for Lehi and Sarah, consult 1 Nephi 17:14, 40; 2 Nephi 1:9; Alma 9:9.

40. The Roman geographer Strabo, writing of an ill-fated military expedition to western Arabia in 25-24 BC, said that a majority of the original army of 10,000 died from “hunger and fatigue and diseases,” a tragedy that he attributed to the “dreadful and healthless” region (Geography 16.4.23-24). Referring to the area inland and along the southern coast of Arabia almost 200 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).

41. Currently, such tribal interests are not as intense as they were less than a century ago because of the long presence of the Soviet Union in southern Yemen. As an illustration of earlier tribal interests in this region, “[Harold] Ingram’s most notable achievement was to bring peace [in 1937] to an area [the Hadhramaut] whose social life, trade and agriculture had been bedevilled for centuries by tribal warfare.

His drive for peace culminated in a three-year truce, later extended for ten years, which was signed by 1400 tribal leaders—an indication of the scope of his task” (J. G. T. Shipman, “The Hadhramaut,” Asian Affairs: Journal of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs 15/2 [June 1984]: 159).

42. 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 (see 19:10-17). Nephi then introduces Isaiah 48-49 by instructing his people not only to “hear . . . the words of the prophet [Isaiah]” but also to “ liken [Isaiah’s Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:174-96. Sorenson estimates that 43 persons boarded Lehi’s ship when it was ready to sail.
words) unto yourselves” (19:24; compare Jacob’s observation in 2 Nephi 6:5).

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

44. One finds further possible reference to the corruption and iniquity in the city that met Lehi when he began his preaching. Of such a 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 no judgment upon the God of Israel” (1 Nephi 20:1–2; Isaiah 48:1–2). Of such wickedness among persons in Jerusalem, Nephi will later say that “their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations” (2 Nephi 25:2). The Book of Mormon text of Isaiah 48:1–2, by the way, differs in important ways from that of the Hebrew text underlying the King James Version.

45. Another strong statement on 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. 1 “do this,” the Lord says, because “I will not suffer my name to be polluted” (see 1 Nephi 20:10–11; Isaiah 48:10–11). I follow here the reading of 1 Nephi, not that of the King James Version.

46. The note about “enemies” arises both in Omni 1:6 and Alma 9:10.

47. See George Rentz, who says that the average elevation of the peaks in the mountain chain is less than 2,000 meters (about 6,500 feet) and that the highest in the south is about 3,760 meters (about 12,300 feet). He also writes that “passes across al-Sarāt . . . are few and far between, and are usually difficult of transit” (“The Zeitait, al-’Arab,” The Encyclopaedia of Islam [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–], 1:536).

48. I have dealt with this aspect of the trek in “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 77–79, 108–11.

49. The Hiltons suggest that Shazer was an oasis at Wadi al-Azlan near the Red Sea that lay about 100 miles south of the al-Bad` oasis (In Search of Lehi’s Trail, 77). This site lies about midway between the modern coastal towns of al-Muwaylah and al-Wajh, which serve Muslim pilgrims traveling from Egypt to Mecca and Medina. From my reconstruction, the Hiltons’ identifications seem possible but not the only possibility. A person can travel through the mountains from both al-Muwaylah and al-Wajh. In an era later than that of Lehi and Sariah, a spur of the incense trail connected the al-Bad` eastward and southward to the main road near Dhadan (modern Al la). See Groom, Frankincense and Myrrh, 192 (map) and 206.

50. The only classical source to describe this area in any detail notes the presence of “eaters of fish” (the translation of Miththuhaqaiq in Huntingford’s rendition) and “nomadic encampments.” The same source pointedly omits any mention of markets along the west coast of Arabia until one reaches Mouza, almost at the southern end of the Red Sea. See G. W. B. Huntingford, The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea (London: Hakluyt Society, 1980), 31–34, §§20–24.

51. The mountains of the west generally receive rain during two periods each year, in March and April and again from June through September (see Grohmann and van Donzel, “Al-Sarāt,” Frankincense and Myrrh, 174–75; and A. F. L. Beeston, Warfare in Ancient South Arabia, Qahtan: Studies in Old South Arabian Epigraphy, Fasc. 3 (London: Luzac & Co., 1976), 6–7.

52. Strabo, quoting Eratothenes of Cyrene, who lived about 275–194 bc, wrote that “farmers” inhabited the northern parts of Arabia. In the central region were “tent-dwellers and camel-herds,” and water was obtained “by digging.” In the “extreme parts towards the south” one finds “fertile” lands (Geography 16.2). The suggestion that the “fertile parts” described by Nephi lay east of the mountains is that of Potter and Wellington (Lehi in the Wilderness, 53–93). Presumably, the expression “fertile parts” meant on one level that there was adequate fodder and water.

53. There is a problem here. It has to do with how far the extended family continued southward along the coastline. If they did not continue far, how did Nephi know that the mountain—the “boundaries”—continued to run near the Red Sea farther south? For Nephi wrote that, after leaving Shazer, his party followed “the same direction” and traveled “in the borders [mountains!]” near the Red Sea (1 Nephi 16:14). But in my view, family members apparently turned into the mountains a bit sooner, near Shazer, leaving the Red Sea behind. My hypothesis is that the party met others along their trail, and these people evidently knew something about the geography of the coast of the Red Sea. Party members could not have avoided such contact.


55. Doughty wrote of the “hostile and incessant life of the Bedu” who “devour one another” and go for days without water and food. He wrote of others who were known as “desert fiends” and who endure “intolerable hardships” and attack others, leaving none alive. Consult Travels in Arabia Deserta, 1:164, 322; see also 166, 174, 179, 308, and 387–93 for accounts of raiding, robbing, killing, and restoring property. Thomas paints a similar picture of life in south Arabia (see Arabia Felix, xxiv, 9, 13, 36, 149–50, 165, 173–74). Nibley suggested that the Lord commanded members of Lehi’s party not to “make much fire” (1 Nephi 17:12) in order to conceal them from marauders (see Lehi in the Desert, 63–67).

56. About this vast tableau in south Yemen we read, “[J]ourneyers speak of the desolate aspect of this vast tableau. . . . It is as if the landscape had been sprinkled with some corrosive liquid, which, having eaten through the top protective layer, was able to bite deeply into the soft core underneath. The result is a maze of narrow gorges, some 1000 feet or more deep, winding and twisting around buttresses of rock” (Shipman, “The Hadhramaut,” 156–57, quoting at first Mabel and Theodore Bent). See also the photo of Shibam and surrounding area in National Geographic 168/4 (October 1985): 476–77.

57. See Phillips, Unknown Oman, 220; and Groom, Frankincense and Myrrh, 165–66.

58. “Some bodies were placed in tombs in a mass of disarticulated bone, indicating nomadic groups, who carried with them in bags or clay coffins those who died during seasonal migrations, burying them in tombs only when the tribe returned to its traditional burial place. It is also possible that, if the person was killed somewhere far away from his traditional burial place, what was left of him was carried in a container (clay coffin) to the traditional burial place, since the bones of those found were very incomplete. The third possibility is that the bodies were first exposed at a designated spot until the flesh had decayed. The bones were then gathered up and placed in a container (clay coffin, anthropoid coffin, wide mouthed storage jars, or bags).” Khair


60. See Brown, Voices from the Dust, 35–37.


62. The tombs consist of a rectangle of stones with long flat stones laid on top to hold the corpse. A mound of stones that marked the burial was then placed over the corpse.

63. Presumably, foreigners could be buried in these cemeteries. Groom notes an extensive burial area between Shabwah and Wadi Jawf that may point to earlier settlement (before 2500 BC). The burial chambers are circular in shape, differing from the rectangular forms of the south Arabian kingdoms. There are also “similar graves and grave mounds in other places near Nagrān” (Frankincense and Myrrh, 224–25).


65. The clouds appear as mists, recalling the mist of Lehi’s dream (see 1 Nephi 8:23). For connections between Lehi’s dream and features of Arabia, see Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 64–69; and “The Queen of Sheba, Skyscraper Architecture, and Lehi’s Dream,” JBMS 11 (2002): 102–3.

66. One exception is that “the results of a cyclone in the mid-19th century were said to have been ‘the [coastal] plain had been flooded, sweeping camels, goats and cattle out to sea and scouring the creek and clearing away the [sand] bar’” (Janzen, Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman, 29–30, citing Miles, 1919).

67. Wind is a concern. Janzen writes that the monsoon winds average “20–25 knots between June and September” while the weaker trade winds from the north and east “predominate during the remainder of the year.” Moreover, there are “frequent sandstorms during these [later] months, particularly in the Salalah plains” (Janzen, Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman, 30, 22).

68. See Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 152–55.


70. The lack of local shipbuilding may explain the brothers’ skepticism (see 1 Nephi 17:47). Of other shipbuilding centers, in the “mart of Persis called Ommana” one finds “local sewn boats called madarate [which] are exported to Arabia” (Huntingford, Periplus, 40, 36; see appendix 4 for Huntingford’s notes on boats and ships in Arabia). On the east African coast at a place called “Rhapta” (exact locale unknown), and on an island called “Menoutias” (Pemba or Zanzibar), one finds the manufacture of sewn boats and, possibly, boats made from one log (Huntingford, Periplus, 29–30, §§15–16, also 96–101 [three maps]). “Sumetian and Akkadian inscriptions of the third millennium BC . . . [mention] Magan . . . and”Uman. Timber and copper are said to be found there, and there is mention of “the shipwrights of Magan” (George F. Hournani, Arab Seafaring [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951], 6).

71. Hournani says that the earliest boats were made “of skins, hollowed tree trunks” and the “earliest sailing ships . . . were not nailed but stitched” (Arab Seafaring, 3–4).


“The We Did Again Take Our Journey”

David A. LeFevre

The title quote 1 Nephi 16:33; 17:1.


2. Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 61. Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 130, 112 (map). Nibley’s map is remarkably similar to the most current ones suggested by Aston, Brown, and Wellington and Potter, whose latest views appear in this issue of JBMS.

4. Nibley’s additional writings about the early chapters of the Book of Mormon appeared in 1957 in An Approach to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), in 1967 in Since Cumorah (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988); and over the course of nearly four decades in other Book of Mormon writings since 1953, collected in The Prophetic Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989).


8. For mention of this phrase in the Old Testament, see Exodus 15:18; Deuteronomy 2:8; Joshua 8:15; Judges 20:42; and 2 Samuel 2:24; 15:23. Note that this trail is not mentioned again in scripture after 2 Samuel 15 (the time of David), and there it refers to a trail near Jerusalem, not on the other side of the Dead Sea. Bible atlases confirm that there was something called “The Way of the Wilderness of Edom” and “The Way of