Lehi in the Desert, Part X - Conclusion

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LEHI IN THE DESERT

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X

Conclusion

Watching Lehi’s travel-worn hand wending its way down those delectable mountains to the sea, one is moved to reflect that they have come an unconscionably long way just to build a ship. Well, let the reader suggest some other route. The best guide to Arabia at the time of the writing of the Book of Mormon imagined forests and lakes in the center of Arabia, while insisting that the coasts of that land were “a rocky wall . . . as dismal and barren as can be: not a blade of grass, or a green thing” to be found. The Book of Mormon reverses the picture and has Lehi avoid the heart of the continent to discover salting woodlands on the southern coast. Where else could Lehi have found his wood on the coast? “It is quite probable,” writes a present-day authority, “that Solomon had to transport his ships, or the material for them, from the Mediterranean, for where on the shores of the Red Sea could timber be found for ship-building?”

And by what other route could Lehi have reached his happy shore? The terrain is more passable in the north, but he could not have crossed north Arabia and then followed the east coast, for to do so he would have had to pass through strong and hostile kingdoms: the northern route was closed to him for political reasons. Equally impossible for the same reasons would have been a move to the west: the Mediterranean was a world of closed harbors and closed seas. A direct route cutting diagonally across the peninsula would have taken the party away from the game-filled mountains of the coast and forced them to travel through what we now know to be difficult desert country, journeying three times as far in the sands as they actually did—and that was the limit of their endurance. Nor could they have followed the coast all the way, because the whole southwestern corner of the peninsula, which Lehi avoided even at the price of traversing part of the terrible Empty Quarter, comprised the kingdom of the Sabaeans, probably the strongest, richest, and most thickly settled state Arabia has ever had.

So, long and painful though it was, Lehi’s itinerary turns out to have been actually the shortest and safest, if not the only one he could possibly have taken.

On the shore of the Arabian Sea the story of Lehi in the Desert properly ends. Though this has been but a preliminary telling, still there is enough to justify certain reflections by way of summary.

Some General Conclusions

We have never been very much interested in “proving” the Book of Mormon, for us its divine provenance has always been an article of faith, and its historical aspects by far the least important thing about it. But the “world” insists that it is a gross and stupid forgery, a barefaced fraud perpetrated by an ignorant rustic who could hardly write his name. They have made the charge; let them prove it. That should be very easy indeed if they are right, since the accused has committed himself in no uncertain terms and at unsparing length. The nature of the document he pretended to be translating is so singular and the conditions it must fulfill so unique and exacting, that its composer must certainly be convicted at a glance if he is lying. On the other hand, if his writing shows any tendency at all to conform to the peculiar conditions prescribed, its critics must be put to a good deal of explaining, and if it shows a constant tendency to conform to those difficult conditions, its critics will be bankrupt. We believe that this little study, tentative and limited as it is, nonetheless indicates such a tendency beyond reasonable doubt.

What has been proved? Simply that everything which the Book of 1 Nephi says happened really could have happened. Not that it did happen: to prove that is neither necessary nor possible. Unique events in history can never be reconstructed with certainty; but characteristic, repeated events—manners, customs, rituals, etc., things that happen not just once but again and again in familiar patterns—may be the object of almost absolute certainty. Hence they, and not specific particulars, are the hardest things to fake; in testing forgeries and identifying documents it is the general pattern that is all-important. If a man claims, for instance, that he overheard a particular conversation or witnessed a certain act in Tahiti, we are wasting our time trying to reconstruct the particular event (which could happen anywhere) if only we can prove that the man was never in Tahiti—and on that head a few casual but searching questions will turn the trick. So in talking about Lehi in the Desert we have, as it were, put the old patriarch on the stand as a witness in the case of Joseph Smith versus the world. Joseph Smith has been accused of fraudulent practices, and Lehi is a witness for the defense. He claims to have spent years in certain parts of the Near East about 2550 years ago. Is he telling the truth?

Generations of shrewd and determined prosecutors have failed to shake Lehi’s testimony or catch him contradicting himself. That should be enough to satisfy the most critical. But now, lo and behold! Out of the dust come new witnesses—Captain Hosaiah of Lachish, a host of sunburned explorers returned from Lehi’s deserts to tell us what life there is like, the ancient poets of the Arabs—and with them crates and crates of exhibits, A to Z, seals, inscriptions, letters, artifacts from Lehi’s own homeland. Whoever dreamed that Lehi would one day be
confronted with eyewitneses to the very scenes he claims he saw? In the light of all this new evidence, the defense asks that the case be reopened.

So-Lehi and the new-found witnesses are cross-examined and their answers compared. The questions come thick and fast: What is your name? Don't you know there is no such personal name? (A shard is produced from Lehi's time and place, and it bears the name Lehi—quite common in those parts.) Where did you live at the time? What do you mean, "land of Jerusalem"? Don't you mean the city? (Defense produces an ancient letter showing that the territory around the city was all known as the land of Jerusalem in ancient times.) Who governed Jerusalem? What kind of men were they? What did you do to turn them against you? Where did you get this great wealth you talk about? How did you happen to learn Egyptian? Wasn't that a waste of time? Why didn't you learn Babylonian? What was all the trouble about in your family? I have quite a list of names here—your purported family and descendants: Do you expect the court to believe these are genuine? If this is a genuine list, why are there no Baal names in it? What is this expression, "the Lamb," you use—don't you know it is only found very late? (Defense produces example from the eighth century B.C.) You say you had dreams: about what? A river? What kind of river? What is this weird "mist of darkness"? Did you ever see anything like it when you were awake? (Dozens of witnesses testify.) Don't you think a dream is pretty slim pretext for leaving your country? In which direction did you flee? How could you build up a big caravan without being apprehended? What did you take with you? How did you travel—on foot? How did you manage to survive with women and children in a terrible desert? How did you manage to escape being killed off by raiders? What did you eat? Did you march continually? When you camped, what was the first thing you did? What kind of altar? What sort of game did you hunt? Where? How? Who did the hunting? Your son made a bow, you say; where in desolate Arabia could he find wood for that? What right had you to go around giving new names to places? Do you think any sane person would give a river and its valley different names? (Roar of protest from Arab witnesses.) Whoever called the Red Sea a fountain? Don't you know that there are no rivers in Arabia? This little speech you gave to your sons on the river bank—isn't that whole story a bit farfetched? (More protest from the Bedouins.) Don't you thing it rather silly to describe a valley as "firm and steadfast"? Where did your sons stay when they went back to Jerusalem? What about this cave? You say the record was on metal plates. Isn't that a rather clumsy way to keep records? Aren't fifty men a ridiculously small garrison for a city like Jerusalem? You describe nocturnal meetings between the elders and the commandant: Wouldn't it be much more sensible to hold meetings by day? Do you want the court to believe that you actually carried grain with you on this long and exhausting journey? Are you trying to tell the court that you found a paradise on the southernmost rim of the most desolate land on earth?

And so on, and so on. The reader may add to the list of searching questions at will—there are well over a hundred, and most of them such questions as no one on earth could have answered correctly 120 years ago. The writer of 1 Nephi was confronted by a hundred delicately interrelated problems of extreme difficulty. The probability of coming up with a plausible statement by mere guesswork once or twice is dim enough, but the chances of repeating the performance a hundred times in rapid succession are infinitely remote. The world through which Lehi wandered was to the westerner of 1830 a quaking bog without a visible inch of footing, lost in impenetrable fog; the best Bible students were hopelessly misinformed even about Palestine. Yet we find

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serves all these terrifying rules most scrupulously.

In your Tibetan epic you might get something right by happy accident once in awhile, but you need not expect to have anything authent-
cic. For consolation you may now take these or any of the best historical novels of any age dealing with a period a thousand or so years be-
tore the time of writing; then take a red pencil and get to work, checking every anachronism, incongruity, misinformation, and in-
accuracy in the book. The result is scarlet carnage. But be merci-
ful! To realize what difficulties confront the creative historian, one
has but to contemplate the laborious production of the Book of Mor-
mon’s latest critics.

It was all too easy for the present author, lacking the unfair advan-
tages of either wit or learning, to show where the above-mentioned
critic contradicts herself again and again. It wasn’t even sport-
ing. It required not one iota of “scholarship.” Since then it
has been possible for others more diligent and more astute to go
further and show how this author has doctored the footnotes repeated-
ly, while a more careful examination of the star witness, the notorious
Bainbridge court record, shows that that priceless treasure never ex-
isted.

A Victor Hugo or an Anatole
France can tell a convincing story
when he is near to his own land
and time, but let any writer, even
the most learned, slip back a cou-
ples of thousand years and five or
six thousand miles around the
globe, and he finds himself in a
treacherous slough from which he
may only extricate himself by taking
frankly to the wings of fantasy. It
is not the particular events but the
general background and atmosphere
of their stories and a thousand lit-
tle slips of detail that oblige Mes-
Srs. White and Douglas to wink know-
ingly and tell us it’s all in fun.
Any handbook on Greek and
Roman antiquities can supply a
writer with all the accurate detail
he can possibly use, but no writer
yet has succeeded in integrating a
mass of such stuff together into a
simple, natural, and flawless whole.
Naomi Mitchison comes nearest,
perhaps, but only because she wise-
ly confines herself to describing such
timeless things as mountains, seas,
and human emotions. Nephi im-
parts his information in such sim-
ple, effortless, and matter-of-fact
discourse that the reader easily
overlooks the vast mass of detail he
has succeeded in weaving into a
natural and uncomplicated pattern.
What writer of historical fiction
has ever remotely approached such
an achievement?

But haven’t we been decidedly
partial in dealing with the story of
Lehi? Of course we have. We are
the counsel for the defense. Our
witnesses have all been of our own
choosing, but no one can deny that
they are competent and unpreju-
diced. We invite the prosecution
to cross-examine the witnesses. To
date they have not done so, but in-
stead have brought their own wit-
nesses into court, up-to-date intelle-
tuals who can tell us just exactly
what the accused was thinking
when he wrote the Book of Mor-
mom. Such evidence is not evi-
dence at all—it is bad science, bad
history, and even bad newspaper-
reporting and would be rejected by
any court in the land. But it might
impress the half-educated jury, and
that is its purpose. We can best
explain the new trend in Book of
Mormon criticism by a little parable.
A young man once claimed he had
found a large diamond in his field
as he was ploughing. He put the
stone on display to the public free
of charge, and everyone took sides.
A psychologist showed, by citing
some famous case studies, that the
young man was suffering from a
well-known form of delusion. An
historian showed that other men
have also claimed to have found dia-
monds in fields and been deceived.
A geologist proved that there were
no diamonds in the area but only
quartz: The young man had been
fooled by a quartz. When asked
to inspect the stone itself, the
geologist answered with a weary,
tolerant smile and a kindly shake
of the head. An English professor
showed that the young man in de-
scribing his stone used the very
same language that others had
used in describing uncut diamonds:
he was, therefore, simply speaking

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the common language of his time. A sociologist showed that only three out of 177 florists' assistants in four major cities believed the stone was genuine. A clergyman wrote a book to show that it was not the young man but someone else who had found the stone.

Finally an indigent jeweler named Sute pointed out that since the stone was still available for examination the answer to the question of whether it was a diamond or not had absolutely nothing to do with who found it, or whether the finder was honest or sane, or who believed him, or whether he would know a diamond from a brick, or whether diamonds had ever been found in fields, or whether people had ever been fooled by quartz or glass, but was to be answered simply and solely by putting the stone to certain well-known tests for diamonds. Experts on diamonds were called in. Some of them declared it genuine. The others made nervous jokes about it and declared that they could not very well jeopardize their dignity and reputations by appearing to take the thing too seriously. To hide the bad impression thus made, someone came out with the theory that the stone was really a synthetic diamond, very skilfully made, but a fake just the same. The objection to this is that the production of a good synthetic diamond 120 years ago would have been an even more remarkable feat than the finding of a real one.

The moral of this story is that the testimony brought out by the prosecution, however learned, has been to date entirely irrelevant and immaterial. It is hardly necessary to observe that it is also incompetent, since it is highly argumentative and based entirely on conclusions of the witnesses, who have furthermore already made up their minds, on other grounds, that the accused is guilty.

Another thing, the prosecution must prove their case to the hilt: it is not enough to show, even if they could, that there are mistakes in the Book of Mormon, for all humans make mistakes; what they must explain is how the "author" of that book happened to get so many things right." Eighty-odd years of zealous searching by the Palestine Exploration Fund have brought to light little or nothing proving the Exodus; to this day "of the story of . . . Saul, David, Solomon, or even of their existence, there is no trace whatever outside of Palestine." Yet this shortage of evidence by no means disproves the Bible. We should not have been disappointed or surprised to find all the records completely silent on matters relevant to the Book of Mormon; yet they have been far from that. If a man makes a mistake in solving a very complex mathematical problem, that proves nothing as to his ability as a mathematician, for the greatest make slips. But if he shows a correct solution for the problem, it is impossible to explain away his success as an accident, and we must recognize him, whoever he is, as a bona fide mathematician. So it is with the author of I Nephi: If we could find mistakes in his work, we could readily explain and forgive them, but when he keeps coming up with the right answer time after time, we can only accept his own explanation of how he does it.

One significant aspect of the story of Lehi in the Desert must not be overlooked. It is wholly, from beginning to end, a history of the Old World. There is in it not so much as a hint of the noble red man. Nothing in it ever betrays the slightest suspicion that the drama is going to end in the New World. Lehi's people thought they had found their promised land in Bountiful by the sea and were horribly upset when Nephi, who himself had thought the project impossible (I Nephi 17:8-9), undertook by special instruction to build a ship.

From what oriental romance, then, was the book of I Nephi stolen? Compare it with any attempts to seize the letter and the spirit of the glamorous East, from Voltaire to Grillparzer, nay, with the soberest oriental histories of the time, and it will immediately become apparent how unreal, extrava-gant, overdone, and stereotyped they all are, and how scrupulously Nephi has avoided all the pitfalls into which even the best scholars
were sure to fall. There is no point at all to the question: Who wrote the Book of Mormon? It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for the unschooled Joseph Smith. And whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Conder's Arabia, in The Modern Traveller series (London, 1875), p. 146. See also, for example, a small mountainous oasis, seem to form a continued line from the southeast of Palestine to Omaum. [Continued from page 824]

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that streets at night were virtually given over to the underworld, as they were in some European cities during the blackouts of the late war. The extreme narrowness of the ancient streets made their blackout doubly effective. From the ancient comedy we learn how heavily barred and closely guarded the doors of private houses had to be at night, and archaeology has shown us Eastern cities in which apparently not a single house window opened onto the public street. East and West, the inmates simply shut themselves in at night as if in a besieged fortress. Even in Shakespeare’s day we see the comical terror of the night watch peering through the streets at hours when all honest people are behind doors. In a word, the streets of any ancient city at night (for the classic trial of Achesines proves this strikingly) were a perfect setting for the committing of deeds of violence without fear of detection.

It was very late when Nephi came upon Lehi (1 Ne. 4:5-7); the streets were deserted and dark. Let the reader imagine what he would do if he were on patrol near an enemy headquarters during a blackout and stumbled on the unconscious form of some notoriously bloodthirsty enemy general. By the brutal codes of war the enemy has no claim to a formal trial, and it is now or never. Lehi was wearing armor, so the only chance of dispatching him quickly, painlessly, and safely was to cut off his head—the conventional treatment of criminals in the East, where beheading has always been by the sword, and where an executioner would be fired for failing to decapitate his victim at one clean stroke. Nephi drew the sharp, heavy weapon and stood over Lehi a long time, debating his course. (1 Ne. 4:9-13.) He was a powerful man and an expert hunter. With due care such a one would do a neat job and avoid getting much blood on himself. But why should he worry about that? There was no chance of meeting any honest citizen, and in the dark no one would notice the blood anyway. What they would notice, even in the dark, would be the armor that Nephi put on. The armor, incidentally, like the sword, could be easily wiped clean. The donning of the armor was the awful and natural thing for Nephi to do. A number of instances from the last war could be cited to show that a spy in the enemy camp is never so safe as when he is wearing the insignia of a high military official.

No one dares challenge such people (who are often touchy); their business is at all times “top secret,” and their uniform gives them complete freedom to come and go unquestioned.

Nephi tells us that he was “led by the spirit.” He was not taking impossible chances, but being in a tight place he followed the safest formula of those who have carried off such assignments. He was clear of the town before anything was discovered. In his whole exploit there is nothing the least improbable.

(End)

Three Appointed to Y.M.M.I.A. General Board

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the mission in Czechoslovakia. Besides his twelve years in the mission field, he has served four years as a member of the Parleys Ward bishopric in Salt Lake City and been active in ward Mutual work.

He and Mrs. Toronto are the parents of six children—three sons and three daughters.

Elder Toronto has been assigned to the M Men Committee of the general board.