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Lehi in the Desert, Part VI—Place Names in the Desert

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

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Abstract: This series is a classic reflection on Lehi's world in Arabia: poetry, tree of life, family affairs, politics, imagery, travel, tents, and foods. It comprises one of the first attempts to test the Book of Mormon against known geographical and cultural details in the regions where Lehi probably traveled in the Old World. The sixth part covers place names.

LEHI IN THE DESERT

By Hugh Nibley, Ph. D.

VI

Place Names in the Desert

THE stream at which he made his first camp Lehi named after his eldest son; the valley, after his second son (I Nephi 2:8.) The oasis at which his party made their next important camp "we did call . . . Shazer." (*Ibid.*, 16:13.) The fruitful land by the sea "we called Bountiful," while the sea itself "we called Irreantum." (*Ibid.*, 17:5.)

By what right do these people re-name streams and valleys to suit themselves? No westerner would tolerate such arrogance. But Lehi is not interested in western taste; he is following a good old Oriental custom. Among the laws "which no Bedouin would dream of transgressing," the first, according to Jennings-Bramley, is that "any water you may discover, either in your own territory or in the territory of another tribe, is named after you."²²⁸ So it happens that in Arabia a great *wady* (valley) will have different names at different points along its course, a respectable number of names being "all used for one and the same valley. One and the same place may have several names, and the *wadi* running close to the same, or the mountain connected with it, will naturally be called differently by members of different clans," according to Canaan,²²⁹ who tells how the Arabs "often coin a new name for a locality for which they have never used a proper name, or whose name they do not know," the name given being usually that of some person.²³⁰ Names thus bestowed by wandering Bedouins "are neither generally known nor commonly used," so we could of course not expect any of Lehi's place names to survive.²³¹

Speaking of the desert "below the Negeb proper," i.e., the general area of Lehi's first camp, Woolley

and Lawrence report, "peaks and ridges have different names among the different Arab tribes, and from different sides,"²³² and of the nearby Tih, Palmer says, "In every locality, each individual object, whether rock, mountain, ravine, or valley, has its appropriate name,"²³³ while Raswan recalls how "miraculously each hill and dale bore a name."²³⁴ But how reliable are such names? Philby recounts a typical case: "Zeyd and 'Ali seemed a little vague about the nomenclature of these parts, and it was only by the irritating process of continual questioning and sifting their often inconsistent and contradictory answers that I was able in the end to piece together the topography of the region."²³⁵ Farther east Cheesman ran into the same difficulty: "I pointed out that this was the third different hill to which he had given the same name. He knew that, was the reply, but that was the way they named them."²³⁶ The irresponsible custom of renaming everything on the spot seems to go back to the earliest times, and "probably, as often as not, the Israelites named for them-

in these mountains, the water bears a different name from the wadi."²³⁸ Likewise we might suppose that, the river having been named after his first-born, the location of the camp would be given, as any westerner would give it, with reference to the river. Instead, the Book of Mormon follows the correct Arabic system of designating the camp not by the name of the river (which might dry up sometime), but by the name of the valley. (I Nephi 10:16, 16:6.)

Another surprise: Nephi more than once refers to the river of Laman as "flowing into the fountain of the Red Sea." Since when is the Red Sea a fountain, forsooth? Answer: ever since it was called a *yam*. "In Hebrew," writes Albright, "the word *yam* means '(large) river' and 'fresh water lake' as well as 'sea' in the English sense. In our case we cannot, however, be sure whether the designation *yam* came originally from inland, referring to pure fresh water as the source of life, or . . . it referred to the Mediterranean as the main source of Canaanite livelihood."²³⁹ In the

IN the spring of the year it is by no means unusual to find rivers in the regions through which Lehi traveled.

selves their own camps, or unconsciously confounded a native name in their carelessness."²³⁷ Yet, in spite of its undoubted antiquity, only the most recent explorers have commented on this strange practice, which seems to have escaped the notice of travelers until our own times.

Even more whimsical and senseless to a westerner must appear the behavior of Lehi in naming a river after one son and its valley after another. But the Arabs don't think that way: In the Mahra country, for example, "as is commonly the case

former case *fountain* is the best translation of the word, and it is certainly in this "inland" sense that Nephi uses it, for he uses a totally different expression (as we shall see) when speaking of the ocean. The Nile and the Euphrates were anciently called *yams*, and this has been explained as "probably a kind of poetic hyperbole, founded upon the fact that they annually overflow their banks."²⁴⁰ Now the average width of the Gulf of 'Aqaba is only about twelve miles, and Musil reports that one can look right across it and "see on the Sinai



A great desert poet, Abu Sokhr, wrote that nothing on earth brings verses as readily to mind as running water and wild places.

peninsula not only the mountains of the south part of the peninsula, but also the plain extending north. . . . To the South we had a view of the greater part of the at-Tihama shore."²⁴¹ From the Arabian side, then, the northeastern arm of the Red Sea for over a hundred miles (i.e., in the sector where Lehi's party first came upon the sea, (I Nephi 2:5) is not an open sea at all, and is not the Red Sea: it is a broad and elongated sheet of water like the Nile and Euphrates at flood, and like them it is not closed water—not a great lake—but opens out to the sea, flowing out through two channels, each but five miles wide. The corresponding western arm of the Red Sea anciently had the mysterious and much-discussed name of *Yam Suph*, "sea (or fountain) of weeds (or rushes)." If it was called a *yam*, what is more natural than that its twin gulf to the east should bear the same desig-

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nation? The latter certainly was what the ancients called a *yam*, that word having, whether applied to salt water or fresh, the basic meaning of *source* or *fountain*. Please note that Nephi does not call the Red Sea a *fountain*, but rather refers to this gulf as a *fountain* of the Red Sea—a feeder, as it were, with spring torrents flowing into it (*Ibid.*, 2:9), a *yam* in the very sense that the Nile and Euphrates at flood were *yams*.

When the party reached the ocean, "we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, which, being interpreted, is many waters." (*Ibid.*, 17:5.) But why did they not simply call it the sea and be done? Because there was no name in their language to designate this particular sea; so they simply gave it a name of their own. The ancients regularly resort to epithets when speaking of the great outer seas, as the "Great Green" of the Egyp-

tians and the "Great Deep" of the Hebrews. In Coptic, the latest form of Egyptian, the Red Sea proper was called *fayum nehah*, literally "many waters."²⁴² If one wanted to speculate, it would be easy to trace Irreantum back to some derivation containing Eg. *wr* (great) and *nt* (Copt. *nout* "standing water"), or to identify the final *-um* with the common (Eg., Copt., Heb.) *yem*, *yam*, *yum*, "sea" and the rest of the word with Copt. *irnahte* "great or many." But we need not go so far: It is enough to know that in Lehi's day the ocean was designated by epithets, and that the sea to the east was called "many waters" by the latest Egyptians.

The first important stop after Lehi's party had left their base camp was at a place which they called *Shazer*. The name is intriguing. The element *shajer* is quite common in Palestine place names; it is a collective meaning "trees," and many Arabs (especially in Egypt) pronounce it *shazher*. It appears in *Thoghret as-Sajur* (the Pass of Trees), the ancient *Shaghur*, written *Segor* in the sixth century.²⁴³ It may be confused with *Shaghur* "seepage," which is held to be identical with *Shihor*, the "black water" of Joshua 19:36.²⁴⁴ This last takes in western Palestine the form *Sozura*,²⁴⁵ suggesting the name of a famous water hole in south Arabia, called *Shisur* by Thomas and *Shisar* by Philby.²⁴⁶ It is a "tiny copse" (Thomas) and one of the loneliest spots in all the world. So we have *Shihor*, *Shaghur*, *Sajur*, *Saghir*, *Segor* (even *Zoar*), *Shajar*, *Sozura*, *Shisur*, and *Shisar*, all connected somehow or other and denoting either seepage—or a weak but reliable water supply—or a clump of trees. Whichever one prefers, Lehi's people could hardly have picked a better name for their first suitable stopping place than *Shazer*.

Before leaving the subject of waters, it would be well to note that Nephi's mention of a river in a most desolate part of Arabia has caused a good deal of quite unnecessary eyebrow-raising. Though Hagarth says that Arabia "probably never had a true river in all its immense area,"²⁴⁷ later authorities, including Philby, are convinced that the peninsula has supported some quite respectable rivers even in his-

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USING EXAMPLES

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words the more vivid will be the picture. Instead of talking about children, talk about John and Mary and Jim. Use "nouns that bleed" and "verbs that sting and rattle."³ If you can choose between two words, choose the one that is simpler but conveys the more clear-cut image. Compare, for instance, the mental pictures the following sentences create:

³*Ibid.*, p. 88.

If a man can excel other men, the world will find and honor him.

If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, though he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.

Emerson, Lecture in 1871

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toric times. The point to notice, however, is that Lehi made his discovery in the spring of the year,²⁴⁸ when that part of the world is full of rushing torrents. Moreover, the very fact that Nephi uses the term "a river of water," to say nothing of Lehi's ecstasies at the sight of it, shows that they are used to thinking in terms of *dry rivers*—the "rivers of sand" of the East.²⁴⁹ One only speaks of "rivers of water" in a country where rivers do not run all the time. But in the spring it is by no means unusual to find rivers in the regions through which Lehi was moving, as a few examples will show.

"We . . . descended . . . into Wady Waleh. Here was a beautiful seil, quite a little river, dashing over the rocky bed and filled with fish. . . . The stream is a very pretty one . . . bordered by thickets of flowering oleanders. Here and there it narrows into a deep rushing torrent. . . ."²⁵⁰ Describing the great wall that runs, like our Hurricane fault in Utah, all along the Dead Sea, the Arabah, and the Red Sea, an earlier traveler says: "Farther south the country is absolutely impassable, as huge gorges one thousand to fifteen hundred feet deep (compare Lehi's "awful chasm") and nearly a mile wide in some places, are broken by the great torrents flowing in winter over perpendicular precipices into the sea."²⁵¹ The sea is the Dead Sea, but the same conditions continue all down the great wall to "the borders which are near the Red Sea." One is reminded of how impressed Lehi was when he saw the river of Laman "flowing into the fountain of the Red Sea." On the desert road to Petra in the springtime "there are several broad streams to pass, the fording of which creates a pleasant excitement."²⁵² A party traveling farther north reports, "we presently came upon the deep Wady 'Allan, which here cuts the plain in two. How delightful was the plash and gurgle of the living water rushing over its rocky bed in the fierce heat of that Syrian day!"²⁵³

Given the right season of the year, then—and the Book of Mormon is obliging enough to give it—one need not be surprised at rivers

in northwestern Arabia. It was this seasonal phenomenon that led Ptolemy to place a river between Yambu and Meccah.²⁵⁴

When Ishmael died on the journey, he "was buried in the place which was called Nahom." (I Nephi 16:34.) Note that this is not "a place which we called Nahom, but the place which was so called, a desert burial ground."²⁵⁵ The Arabic root *NHM* has the basic meaning of "to sigh or moan," and occurs nearly always in the third form, "to sight or moan with another." The Hebrew *Nahum*, "comfort," is related but that is not the form given in the Book of Mormon. At this place, we are told, "the daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly," and are reminded that among the desert Arabs mourning rites for the dead are a strict monopoly of the women, related Hebrew rites being less exclusively female.²⁵⁶ Ishmael here seems more of an Arab than ever, while Nephi continues to display unerring accuracy on every point.

LEHI'S Qasid

There is no more surprising or impressive evidence for the genuineness of the Book of Mormon than the eloquent little verses (they are a sort of *qasid*)²⁵⁷ which Lehi on one occasion addressed to his wayward sons.

It was just after the first camp had been pitched, with due care for the proper rites of thanksgiving at the "altar of stones." Lehi, being then free to survey the scene more at his leisure (among the desert people it is the women who make and break camp, though the *sheikh*, as we have seen, must officiate in the sacrifice), proceeded, as was his right, to name the river after his first-born and the valley after his second son. (I Nephi 2:6-8, 14.) They examined the terrain more closely, as Arabs always do after pitching camp in a place where they expect to spend some time, and discovered that the river "emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea," at a point "near the mouth thereof" (*Ibid.*, 2:8-9), which suggests the Gulf of 'Aqaba at a point not far above the Straits of Tiran. When Lehi beheld the view, perhaps from the sides of Mt. Musafa or Mt. Mendisha,²⁵⁸ he turned to his two el-

der sons and recited his remarkable verses. Nephi seems to have been standing by, for he takes most careful note of the circumstance:

And when my father saw that the waters of the river emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea, he spake unto Laman, saying: O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness!

And he also spake unto Lemuel: O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord! (I Nephi 2:9-10.)

No subject has been more inten-

sively studied than that of primitive Semitic poetry, and nowhere could one find a more perfect illustration of the points that are now agreed upon as to the nature and form of the original article than in this brief account of Nephi's.

First there is the occasion: It was the sight of the river flowing into the gulf which inspired Lehi to address his sons. In a famous study, Goldziher pointed out that the earliest desert poems ever mentioned are "those *Quellenlieder* (songs to springs of water) which, according to the record of St. Nilus, the an-

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(Continued from preceding page)

cient Arabs used to intone after having refreshed and washed themselves in some fountain of running water discovered in the course of a long journeying."²⁵⁰ Nilus' own account is a vivid picture of what Lehi's party went through:

The next day . . . after making their way as is usual in the desert by devious routes, wandering over the difficult terrain, forced to turn aside now this way,

now that, circumventing mountains, stumbling over rough, broken ground through all but impenetrable passes, they beheld in the far distance a spot of green in the desert; and striving to reach the vegetation by which the oasis might provide a camp or even sustain a settlement for some of them (we are reading *nomadikon* for the senseless *monadikon*), as they conjectured, they turned their eyes towards it as a storm-tossed pilot views the port. Upon reaching it, they found that the spot did not disappoint their expectations, and that their wishful fantasies had not led them to false hopes. For the water was abundant,

clear to the sight and sweet to the taste, so that it was a question whether the eye or the mouth was the more delighted. Moreover, there was adequate forage for the animals; so they unloaded the camels and let them out to graze freely. For themselves, they could not let the water alone, drinking, splashing, and bathing as if they couldn't revel in it enough. So they chanted songs in its praise (the river's), and composed hymns to the spring . . .²⁶⁰

(To be continued)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ²²⁸In *PEFQ* 1908, p. 257. "You" here is used in a general sense, referring to the individual or party that finds the water and so has the right of naming it.
- ²²⁹T. Canaan, in *Jnl. Palest. Or. Soc.* II (1922), 139, cf. Hogarth, *Penetration of Arabia*, p. 162
- ²³⁰T. Canaan, "Studies in the Topography and Folklore of Petra," in *Ibid.*, IX (1929) 138-218 has become the standard work on desert nomenclature; passages cited here are from p. 140.
- ²³¹*Loc. cit.*, Burton, *Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah*, etc. I, 250 n.3: "a folio volume would not contain a three-months' collection" of such names, so numerous are they.
- ²³²*The Wilderness of Zin*, p. 70
- ²³³E. H. Palmer, *The Desert of the Exodus* (Cambridge, 1871) I, 20
- ²³⁴*Drinkers of the Wind*, p. 51
- ²³⁵Philby, *The Empty Quarter*, p. 39
- ²³⁶R. E. Cheesman, in *Unknown Arabia*, p. 161
- ²³⁷Woolley and Lawrence, *Wilderness of Zin*, p. 86f, concluding that "to expect continuity of name, as in settled districts in Syria, is vanity." Speaking of the south deserts, Capt. Conder (in *PEFQ* 1875, p. 126) observes that while "The settled population have preserved the ancient names under forms more or less modified, the wandering Bedouin have replaced them by descriptive titles of their own."
- ²³⁸B. Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 50
- ²³⁹W. F. Albright, *Archaeology & the Relig. of Israel*, p. 148f
- ²⁴⁰J. Olford, "The Red Sea," *PEFQ* 1920, p. 179
- ²⁴¹Cited by W. J. Phythian-Adams in *PEFQ* 1930, p. 204
- ²⁴²W. Spiegelberg, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch*, pp. 204, 258
- ²⁴³*Survey of Eastern Palestine* I, 239, 241; *Survey of Western Palestine Name Lists*, pp. 116, 134, 207, 259, 350, 367, 433
- ²⁴⁴C. R. Conder in *PEFQ* 1876, p. 134 and *Surv. of Wstrn. Palest. Name Lists*, pp. 28, 93
- ²⁴⁵*Survey of Western Palestine* II, p. 169
- ²⁴⁶Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 136f; Philby, *Empty Quarter*, p. 231
- ²⁴⁷*Penetration of Arabia*, p. 3
- ²⁴⁸Nephi's story begins "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah." (1 Ne. 1:4) and moves very rapidly. Since, "in the Bible throughout the 'first month' always refers to the first spring month," (Yahuda, *Accuracy of the Bible*, p. 201), Nephi's "commencement of the year" would fall in the springtime, regardless of when Zedekiah began to reign, since the Jews like the Egyptians dated a king's rule from the beginning of the real year, the ritual time of coronation.
- ²⁴⁹The term is also used by Egyptian and Greek writers, e.g. Alexander the Great crosses a "river of sand" in the desert. The Arabs call a dry lake "sea of salt," or *Bahr bila ma*, i.e. "lake without water," (Burton, *Pilg. to Al-Madinah*, etc. p. 72, n. 1). To us it seems pedantic to distinguish between lakes of water and lakes of something else, but the discrimination is important in a land where most lakes and rivers are dry ones.
- ²⁵⁰E. H. Palmer, in *Surv. of Wstrn. Palest. Special Papers*, p. 67f
- ²⁵¹C. R. Conder in *PEFQ* 1875, p. 130f
- ²⁵²G. Hill, "Journey to Petra," *PEFQ* 1897, p. 144
- ²⁵³W. Exing, "Journey in the Hauran," *PEFQ* 1895, p. 175
- ²⁵⁴Burton, *Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah*, etc. II, p. 154
- ²⁵⁵Though Bedouins sometimes bury the dead where they die, many carry the remains great distances to bury them. A Jaussen in *Revue Biblique* X (1901), 607
- ²⁵⁶Jaussen, *loc. cit.*: T. Canaan in *Jnl. Palest. Or. Soc.* XI (1931), 189: "In funeral processions women may not mix with men. . . . When the burial is over the women assemble alone. . . . In visiting the tomb . . . they always go alone. . . ." Cf. Baldensperger in *PEFQ* 1901, p. 83; and Burkhardt, *Notes* I, 101: "At the moment of a man's death, his wives, daughters, and female relations unite in cries of lamentation. . . ." Among the Jews

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Lehi in the Desert

the men play a more prominent part in mourning rites, and even professional male mourners were not unknown, Nowack, *Hebr. Archaeol.*, p. 196.

²⁸⁷The word *qasid* is used to denote various types of Arabic verse including the now unknown primitive poetry of the desert. It is in this sense that we employ it here. The root *qsd* means to "intend," hence it applies to a poem with an objective—money, love, or moral instruction. Authorities disagree as to the original motif. Harder's dictionary applies the word to any kind of poem.

²⁸⁸The river would flow between these two mountains, as is indicated in the *National Geographic Map* of the area. The valley seems to be commodious enough. We suggest an investigation: from the most ancient times it has been the custom for travelers in the desert to inscribe their names on rocks at places where they have camped (Th. Nöldeke, *Die Semitischen Sprachen*, p. 37). It is almost certain that Lehi's people left their marks at the more important stopping places.

²⁸⁹J. Goldziher, *Abhandlungen zur arabischen Philologie* (Leiden, 1896) I, 58

²⁹⁰St. Nilus, in *Migne Patrol. Graec.* 79, 648

On The Bookrack

(Continued from page 466)

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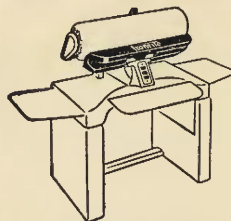
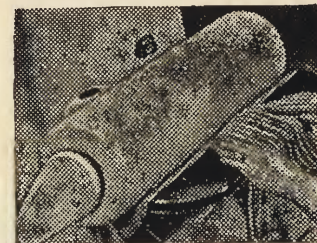
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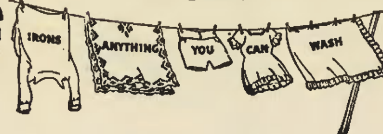


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