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## Lehi in the Desert, Part VIII—Adventure in Jerusalem

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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 eighth part covers Nephi and his brothers' return to Jerusalem for the records.

# LEHI IN THE DESERT

By  
Hugh Nibley  
Ph. D.

## VIII

### ADVENTURE IN JERUSALEM

**N**EPHI and his brothers made two trips back to Jerusalem. The second was only to "the land of Jerusalem" to pick up Ishmael,<sup>284</sup> but the first was an exciting and dangerous assignment in the city itself. Though it was no mere raid, as we have seen, the men taking their tents with them and going quite openly, they were expecting trouble and drew lots to see who should go in to Laban. The story tells of hiding without the walls, daring exploits in the dark streets, mad pursuits, masquerading, desperate deeds, and bitter quarrels—a typical Oriental romance, you will say, but typical because such things actually do, and did, happen in Eastern cities. It has ever been a standard and conventional bit of gallantry for some Bedouin bravo with a price on his head to risk his life by walking right through a city in broad daylight, a very theatrical gesture but a thing which my Arab friends assure me has been done in real life a thousand times. It was while reading the Beni Hilal epic that the writer was first impressed by the close resemblance of the behavior of Lehi's sons on that quick trip to Jerusalem to that of the young braves of the Beni Hilal when they would visit a city under like circumstances.<sup>285</sup> The tales of the migrations of the 'Amer tribe have the same pattern—camping without the walls, drawing lots to see who would take a chance, sneaking into the city and making a getaway through the midnight streets<sup>286</sup>—it is all in the Book of Mormon and all quite authentic.

Thoroughly typical also is the hiding out of the young men in caves near the city while they waited for Laban's henchmen to cool off and debated with Oriental heat and passion, their next move. (I Nephi 3:27-28.) Since the *Pales-*

*tine Exploration Fund Quarterly* started to appear many years ago, its readers have been treated to a constant flow of official reports on newly-discovered caves in and near Jerusalem. The country is peppered with them; for the area southwest of the city, "it is difficult to give an account of the principal excavations of this type (caves) without appearing to use the language of exaggeration . . . to attempt a descriptive catalogue of these caves would be altogether futile, the mere labor of searching the hills for examples . . . would be almost endless."<sup>287</sup> Farther out, the Beit Jibrin area "contains an innumerable number of artificial caves,"<sup>288</sup> and the deserts of Tih and Moab swarm with them.<sup>289</sup> Many of these caves are younger than Lehi's time, but many are also older and have been used at all times as hiding places.<sup>290</sup> But who in America knew of these hiding places a hundred years ago?

The purpose of the first return trip to Jerusalem was the procuring of certain records which were written on bronze (the Book of Mormon like the Bible always uses "brass" for what we call bronze)<sup>291</sup> plates. Lehi had a dream in which he was commanded to get these records which, as he already knew, were kept at the house of one Laban. Nephi does not know exactly the reason for this and assumes, incorrectly, that the object is to "preserve unto our children the language of our fathers."<sup>292</sup> It is interesting that the Beni Hilal in setting out for their great trek felt it necessary to keep a record of their fathers and to add to it as they went, "so that the memory of it might remain for future generations."<sup>293</sup> The keeping of such a *daftar* was also known to other wandering tribes.

But what were the records doing at Laban's house, and who was Laban anyway?

For ages the cities of Palestine and Syria had been more or less under the rule of military governors, of native blood but, in theory at least, answerable to Egypt. "These commandants (called *rabis* in the Amarna letters) were subordinate to the city-princes (*chazan*), who commonly address them as 'Brother' or 'Father.'"<sup>294</sup> They were a sordid lot of careerists whose authority depended on constant deception and intrigue, though they regarded their offices as hereditary and sometimes styled themselves kings. In the Amarna letters we find these men raiding each other's caravans to build up their private fortunes, accusing each other of unpaid debts and broken promises, mutually denouncing each other as traitors to Egypt, and generally displaying the usual time-honored traits of the crooked high official in the East. The Lachish letters show that such men were still the lords of creation in Lehi's day—the commanders of the towns around Jerusalem were still acting in closest cooperation with Egypt in military matters, depending on the prestige of Egypt to bolster their corrupt power, and still behaving as groveling and unscrupulous timeservers.<sup>295</sup>

One of the main functions of local governors in the East has always been to hear petitions, and their established practice has ever been to rob the petitioners (or anyone else) wherever possible. The Eloquent Peasant story of fifteen centuries before Lehi and the innumerable Tales of the Qadis from fifteen centuries after him are all part of the same picture, and Laban fits into that picture as if it were drawn to set off his portrait.

. . . and Laman went in unto the house of Laban, and he talked with him as he sat in his house.

And he desired of Laban the records which were engraven upon the plates of



—Photograph by Adelbert Bartlett

MODERN-DAY HARVESTING IN MEGIDDO, PALESTINE.

brass, which contained the genealogy of my father.

And . . . Laban was angry, and thrust him out from his presence; and he would not that he should have the records. Wherefore, he said unto him: Behold thou art a robber, and I will slay thee.

But Laman fled out of his presence, and told the things which Laban had done, unto us. (1 Nephi 3:11-13.)

Later the brothers returned to Laban laden with their family treasure, foolishly hoping to buy the plates from him. They might have known what would happen:

And it came to pass that when Laban saw our property, and that it was exceeding great, he did lust after it, insomuch that he thrust us out, and sent his servants to slay us, that he might obtain our property.

And it came to pass that we did flee before the servants of Laban, and we were obliged to leave behind our property, and it fell into the hands of Laban. (*Ibid.*, 3:25-26.)

Compare this with the now classic story of Wenamon's interview with the rapacious Zakar Baal of Byblos. The Egyptian entered the great man's house and "found him sitting in his upper chamber, leaning his back against a window," even as Laman accosted Laban "as he sat in his house." When his

visitor desired of the merchant prince that he part with some cedar logs, the latter flew into a temper and accused him of being a thief ("Behold thou art a robber!" says Laban), demanding that he produce his credentials. Zakar Baal then "had the journal of his fathers brought in, and had them read it before him," from which it is plain that the important records of the city were actually stored at his house and kept on tablets. From this ancient "journal of his fathers" the prince proved to Wenamon that his ancestors had never taken orders from Egypt, and though the latter softened his host somewhat by reminding him that Ammon, the lord of the universe, rules over all kings, he was given a bad time by the ruler, who, with cynical politeness, offered to show him the graves of some other Egyptian envoys, whose mission had not been too successful; the negotiations being completed Zakar Baal, on a legal technicality, turned his guest over to the mercies of a pirate fleet lurking while he smiled and bowed, for after all Wenamon was an Egyptian official, whereas Lehi's sons lost

their bargaining power when they lost their fortune.

A few deft and telling touches resurrect the pompous Laban with photographic perfection. We learn in passing that he commanded a garrison of fifty, that he met in full ceremonial armor with "the elders of the Jews" for secret consultations by night, that he had control of a treasury, that he was of the old aristocracy, being a distant relative of Lehi himself, that he probably held his job because of his ancestors, since he hardly received it by merit, that his house was the storing place of very old records, that he was a large man, short-tempered, crafty, and dangerous, and in the bargain cruel, greedy, unscrupulous, weak, and given to drink. All of which makes him a *Rabu* to the life, the very model of an Oriental pasha. He is cut from the same cloth as the military governors of the Lachish letters: Jaush, "probably," according to J. W. Jack, "the military governor of this whole region, in control of the defenses along the western frontier of Judah, and an intermediary with the authorities in

(Continued on following page)

## LEHI IN THE DESERT

(Continued from preceding page)  
 Jerusalem. The author of the letters, Hoshaiiah, was apparently the leader of the military company situated at some outpost near the main road from Jerusalem to the coast." His character is one of "fawning servility."<sup>297</sup>

As to the garrison of fifty, it seems pitifully small. It would have been just as easy for the author of I Nephi to have said "fifty thousand," and made it really impressive,<sup>298</sup> but the Book of Mormon is very headstrong in such matters. It has reason to be. The number fifty suits perfectly with the Amarna picture where the military forces are always so surprisingly small and a garrison of thirty to eighty men is thought adequate even for big towns; and this is still more strikingly vindicated in a letter of Nebuchadnezzar, Lehi's contemporary, wherein the great king orders: "As to the fifties who were under your command, those gone to the rear, or fugitives return to their ranks." Commenting on this, Offord says, "In these days it is interesting to note the indication here, that in the Babylonian army a platoon contained fifty men;"<sup>299</sup> also, we might add that it was called a "fifty,"—hence, "Laban with his fifty." (I Nephi 4:1.) In great wars the organization of opposing armies quickly becomes similar in all essential respects, since neither side can allow the other to overreach it, and in the struggle between Babylonia and Egypt, individuals and groups change sides with great frequency—then as now the world was burdened with a single standard type of military organization. Laban, like Hoshaiiah of Lachish, had a single company of soldiers under him representing the permanent garrison, as against the "tens of thousands" he commanded in the field—it was not these latter but the "fifty" that frightened Laman and Lemuel; and like Jaush (who may even have been his successor) he kept in close touch with "the authorities in Jerusalem."

Returning by night in a third attempt to get the records, Nephi stumbled over the prostrate form of Laban, lying dead drunk in the deserted street. (*Ibid.*, 4:7.) The commander had been (so his servant

later told Nephi) in conference with "the elders of the Jews . . . out by night among them" (*Ibid.*, 4:22), and was wearing his full-dress armor. There is a world of inference in this: we sense the gravity of the situation in Jerusalem, which "the elders" are still trying to conceal; we hear the suppressed excitement of Zoram's urgent talk as he and Nephi hastened through the streets to the city gates (*Ibid.*, 4:27), and from Zoram's willingness to change sides and leave the city, we can be sure that he, as Laban's secretary,<sup>300</sup> knew how badly things were going. From the Lachish letters it is clear that well-informed people were quite aware of the critical state of things at Jerusalem, even while the *sarim* were working with all their might to suppress every sign of criticism and disaffection. How could they take counsel to provide for the defense of the city and their own interests without exciting alarm or giving rise to general misgivings? The only way, of course, would be to hold their councils of war in secret. The Book of Mormon shows them doing just that.

With great reluctance, but urged persistently by "the voice of the Spirit," Nephi took Laban's own sword and cut off his head with it. This episode is viewed with horror and incredulity by people who approved and applauded the recent killing of far more innocent people than Laban by the armed youth of our own land.<sup>301</sup> The Book of Mormon is no more than the Bible confined to mild and pleasant episodes; it is for the most part a sad and grievous tale of human folly. No one seemed more disturbed by the unpleasant incident than Nephi himself, who took great pains to explain his position. (*Ibid.*, 4:10-18.) First he was "constrained by the Spirit" to kill Laban, but he said in his heart that he had never shed human blood and became sick at the thought: "I shrunk and would that I might not slay him." The Spirit spoke again, and to its promptings Nephi adds his own reasons:

I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea, and he would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property.

But this was still not enough; the Spirit spoke again, explaining the Lord's reasons and assuring Nephi that he would be in the right; to which Nephi appends yet more arguments of his own, remembering the promise that his people would prosper only by keeping the commandments of the Lord,

and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments . . . save they should have the law.

which the worthless and criminal Laban alone kept them from having;

And again. I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause. . . . Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit.

At long last Nephi finally did the deed, of which he is careful to clear himself, putting the responsibility for the whole thing on the Lord. If the Book of Mormon were a work of fiction, nothing would be easier than to have Laban already dead when Nephi found him or simply to omit an episode which obviously distressed the writer quite as much as it does the reader.

(To be continued)

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>284</sup> *Ne.* 7:2-5. The expression "up unto the house of Ishmael" sets the house apart by itself in the land of Jerusalem. They traveled "into the wilderness to go up to Jerusalem," which is a Semitic way of saying "through the wilderness in the direction of Jerusalem." The fact that this was a simple and uncomplicated mission at a time when things would have been hotter than ever in the city for the brethren, who on their former expedition were chased by Laban's police, implies that Ishmael, like Lehi, lived well out in the country.

<sup>285</sup> Margoliouth (*Arabs and Israelites*, p. 23) cites the Beni Hilal as illustrating migration even as early as the Exodus, and gives some rules also observed by Lehi's party, (p. 24): "They do not migrate haphazardly . . ." but send out scouts, and before making a move are careful to determine the will of heaven: "various omens and auguries entered into the process. . . . If human beings are unchanged, it is likely that the emigrants would not at once lose all attachment to the tribes whence they had sprung. . . ."

<sup>287</sup> J. Dissard, "Les Migrations et les Vicissitudes de la Tribu des 'Amer,'" *Revue Biblique* N.S. II (1905) 411-416

<sup>287</sup> F. J. Bliss et al., *Excavation in Palestine 1898-1900*, p. 204

<sup>288</sup> *Id.*, p. 269

<sup>289</sup> *Survey of Western Palestine Special Papers*, I, 19ff

<sup>290</sup> Bliss, *op. cit.*, p. 266f. On the use of these caves as hiding places in ancient times, W. F. Birch, "Hiding places in Canaan," *PEFQ* 1884, pp. 61-70, also 1880, p. 235f and 1881, p. 323f

<sup>291</sup> While "brass" properly refers to any alloy of copper, "to distinguish alloys of copper and tin, the name BRONZE has recently been adopted," according to the *Oxford Dictionary*.

<sup>292</sup> As a matter of fact, that language was not

(Continued on page 670)



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## Archives of Sweden

(Concluded from page 621)

brand, representing the Rekolid Company, which company holds the contract to do the microfilming work throughout Sweden and Finland, presented Mr. Boethius with a brand-new American latest model microfilm reading machine for which he also expressed his appreciation.

"This memorable occasion, the sixth of April, 1949, 119 years after the organization of the Church, will never be forgotten in the Swedish Mission, and it bears out the prophetic utterance—'A great and

marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men.' The whole world marvels at what is being accomplished in the short span since the restoration of the Church. These things are only accomplished through the proper and inspired leadership of the Church.

—Margit J. Blomquist"

These records from Sweden and Finland are arriving in regular shipments at the Genealogical Society and are being carefully inspected and catalogued for use by the general public.

## Lehi In The Desert

(Continued from page 642)

preserved even in antiquity, and when the time came for the record to fulfil its great purpose of bearing witness to the world, it had to be translated by the gift and power of God. Of this purpose Nephi at the time knew nothing.

<sup>2037</sup>Taghribah Beni Hilal, p. 14

<sup>2038</sup>Meyer, G.d.A., II, 1, 137

<sup>2039</sup>J. W. Jack, "The Lachish Letters," *PEFQ* 1938, p. 168

<sup>2040</sup>We are following the Wenamon story as given in J. Breasted, *History of Egypt*, (1905) pp. 513-518. It is given at length in almost any history of Egypt or the Near East, e.g. James Baikie, *The History of the Pharaohs* (London, 1908) pp. 285-7; *Comb. Anc. Hist.* II, 193.

<sup>2041</sup>Jack, loc. cit.

<sup>2042</sup>The older brothers, though they wish to emphasize Laban's great power, mention only fifty. (3:31.) It is Nephi in answering them who says that the Lord is "mightier than Laban and his fifty, or even than his tens of thousands." (*Ibid.*,

4:1.) As a high military commander Laban would command tens of thousands in battle; but such an array is of no concern to Laman and Lemuel: it is the "fifty" they must look out for, i.e., the regular, permanent garrison at Jerusalem.

<sup>2043</sup>Joshua Offord, "Archaeological Notes on Jewish Antiquities," *PEFQ* 1916, p. 148

<sup>2044</sup>W. F. Albright, "The Seal of Eliakim, etc.," *Jnl. Bibl. Lit.* 51 (1932-79-83), shows that the title "servant" in Jerusalem at this time meant something like "official representative," and was an honorable rather than a degrading title.

<sup>2045</sup>Sanaul ibn Adiyt, the most famous Jewish poet of Arabia in ancient times, gained undying praise and fame among all the Arabs when he allowed his own son to be cruelly put to death before his eyes rather than give up some costly armor with the keeping of which he had been entrusted by a friend. The story, true or not, illustrates the difference between eastern and western standards and should warn the reader against being shocked by some things he reads—the Arabs are just as shocked by the callousness of Americans in some things. Brockelmann, *Gesch.d.arab.Lit.* (1909), p. 34.

## MUTUAL CONVENTION IN HAWAII

(Continued from page 643)

One of the reasons for the visit of Superintendent Curtis, who is one of the sectional vice chairmen of Region 12, Boy Scouts of America, was the sectional meeting of the Boy Scouts in Honolulu. Scout meetings were also held in Kona, Hilo, and Maui.

Several national and regional officers of the Boy Scouts of America were there, including William V. M. Fawcett, National Chairman Explorer Committee; E. Urnar Goodman, from the national office; Henry B. Grandin, Chairman of Region 12, Don Moyer, regional Scout executive; and Roland E. Dye, deputy regional executive.

Latter-day Saint boys are prominent in the Scout activities in the islands, as they are wherever the Church is organized. Scout work is being given an increased impetus on the island of Oahu by Elder Milt Allen, deputy under Scout executive, Hazen Shower. Elder Allen is giving special attention to the training of Scout leaders among the Latter-day Saints. Elder Harrald S. Alvord, recently appointed to the

Y.M.M.I.A. general board and a Scout executive, attended to aid the Scout work.

The Mutuals are teaching the fundamentals of the Church through spiritualized recreation and inspirational lessons. The age groups are following the lesson plan. The leaders of the M.I.A. there, as elsewhere, are trying to build a testimony in the heart of every boy and every girl.

Attendance at Mutual is almost phenomenal; one Mutual we attended had present 240 people. While we were in Hawaii, the Junior Girls held their rose award night. At an M Men-Gleaner banquet nearly four hundred were in attendance. It was an inspiring sight to see the representation of nations: Hawaiian, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Samoan, and American. The tables were covered with banana leaves; the decorations consisted of gorgeous flowers, including hibiscus, bird of paradise, and antherium—placed in the center of the table down its entire length. Place cards depicted this year's theme. The young people,