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Lesson 20 - Life in the Desert, 3. Lehi's Dream

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Abstract: Long ago Sigmund Freud showed that dreams are symbolic, that they take their familiar materials from everyday life and use them to express the dreamer's real thoughts and desires. Lehi's dreams have a very authentic undertone of anxiety of which the writer of 1 Nephi himself seems not fully aware; they are the dreams of a man heavily burdened with worries and responsibilities. The subjects of his unrest are two: the dangerous project he is undertaking, and the constant opposition and misbehavior of some of his people, especially his two eldest sons. It may be instructive for the student to look for these two themes in the dreams discussed here. This lesson is devoted to pointing out the peculiar materials of which Lehi's dreams are made, the images, situations, and dream-scenery which though typical can only come from the desert world in which Lehi was wandering. These 13 snapshots of desert life are submitted as evidence for that claim.

Lesson 20

LIFE IN THE DESERT

3. Lehi's Dreams

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A Desert Album, 13 Typical View Shots: In reporting his father's dreams, Nephi has handed us, as it were, a dozen vivid little snapshots or colored slides of the desert country, that should prove to the most skeptical that somebody who had a hand in the writing of the Book of Mormon actually lived there.

1. The first is a picture of a lone traveler, Lehi himself, in "a dark and dreary waste," (1 Ne. 8:4-7); he has "traveled for the space of many hours in darkness," and in desperation "Began to pray unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me."

Now if we turn to the vast photo-album of Arabic lyric poetry or to the actual photographs of inscriptions scratched on a thousand red rocks we will find almost countless duplications of this particular snapshot—the lone wanderer lost in the darkness. Of all the images that haunt the early Arab poets this is by all odds the commonest. It is the standard nightmare of the Arab; and it is the supreme boast of every poet that he has

traveled long distances through dark and dreary wastes all alone.¹ That the poetry is born of grim reality may be seen from the inscriptions. One fellow, many centuries ago, reminds us of an event that took place "in the year in which he walked the whole night in the mire."² In the inscriptions a thousand lone wanderers send up in desperation prayers for help: "O Radu, help Shai!" "O Allat and Gad-'Awidh, grant protection!"³ The great Abu Zaid said there was one prayer that he had learned in a dream which alone was his guarantee of safety in the desert: "Preserve me, O God . . . guard me in my person and my property . . . cover me with the curtain of thy grace. . . ."⁴ Just as Nephi prays: "O Lord wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!" as he wanders "in the path of the low valley." (2 Ne. 4:32-33.)

2. In the next picture we see "a large and spacious field" (1 Ne. 8:9), "a large and spacious field, as if it had been a world." (1 Ne. 8:20.) This in Arabic is the symbol of release from fear and oppression, the state of being "mabsut" or spread out. The Arab poet describes the world as a *maidan*, or large and spacious field,⁵ an image borrowed by the earliest Christian writers, notably The Pastor of Hermes and the Pseudo-Clementines, for the religious symbolism of the *maidan* is as old as it is obvious.⁶ Heroic literature is full of it.

3. The next picture is a close-up of a tree "the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow." (1 Ne. 11:8) ". . . whose fruit was desirable to make one happy . . . most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted . . . the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen . . . desirable above all other fruit." (1 Ne. 8:10-12.)

Where would one find such a tree in the poets? Only in the gardens of kings. The Persian King, and in imitation of him, the Byzantine Emperor and the Great Khan had such trees constructed artificially out of pure silver to stand beside their thrones and represent the

Tree of Life,⁷ and if the reader has a genuine Persian or Turkish rug in his home he may discover that the central pattern, though stylized almost beyond recognition, represents either a flowing vase (the water of life) or a tree. The naturalistic curves and tendrils that surround the tree and run to the ornamental border are nothing less than the garden of Eden and the tree in the center is the Tree of Life." The rug pattern turns up on Cappadocian seals four thousand years old. Many hundreds of books and articles have been written on the Tree of Life as a symbol and a cult-object, but in no land on earth is the sight of a real tree, and especially a fruit-bearing one, greeted with more joy and reverence than in treeless Arabia, where certain trees are regarded as holy because of their life-giving propensities.⁸

4. In the next picture the man who has found the tree all by himself is looking for his family, that they too might be revived by the fruit. ". . . I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also . . . and as I cast my eyes round about, that perhaps I might discover my family . . ." (1 Ne. 8:12-13.)

Perhaps the commonest and most touching theme in the vast corpus of Arabic desert inscriptions is the theme of longing and looking for one's family. When the writer comes to water and rests, he wishes for his family, and is usually smitten with terrible longing to see them. The desire is often intensified by the sudden recognition of some long forgotten landmark, as in the poets, or by noting an inscription put there, maybe years ago, by the lost loved ones, or some other little reminder of an earlier and happier visit to the place. Thus: "N. encamped in this place yearning . . . and he yearned for Shal-bal." ". . . and he found the inscriptions of A. and of his father, so he yearned for them."⁹ ". . . and he found the inscription of his uncle, so he yearned for him." ". . . and he found the inscription of his uncle, and he longed . . ."¹⁰ "N. camped here . . . and he was looking out for his imprisoned fellows. So O Baal-Samin, rest to those who are distressed."¹¹ "H. . . found the inscrip-

tions of his fellows and was sad. . . ."¹² "N. N. laid a stone on the tomb of his brother who was killed. . . . And he was looking out for his two brothers. . . ."¹³

5. In the next picture we see the missing family resting at a spring and trying to decide which way to go. From the spring comes "a river of water and it ran along, and it was near the tree . . . and I saw the head thereof a little way off. . . ." (1 Ne. 8:13-14.) This is the authentic "scenery of a desert oasis, with its rivers springing miraculously from nowhere and emptying themselves again perhaps in the desert sands."¹⁴ The expression "river of water" is used only for small, local streams,¹⁵ and here Lehi is so near the source of the clear little stream that he can recognize people standing there.

6. The next picture is largely a blur, for it represents ". . . a mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost." (1 Ne. 8:23.) We see other dim figures, guiding themselves to the tree by holding on to a rod or railing of iron as they ". . . did press forward through the mist of darkness. . . ." (1 Ne. 8:24)

In the many passages of Arabic poetry in which the hero boasts that he has traveled long distances through dark and dreary wastes all alone, the main source of terror (the heat and glare of the day, though nearly always mentioned, are given second place), and the culminating horror is almost always a "mist of darkness," a depressing mixture of dust, and clammy fog, which, added to the night, completes the confusion of any who wander in the waste.¹⁶ Quite contrary to what one would expect, these dank mists are described by travelers in all parts of Arabia, and el-Ajajja, one of the greatest of early desert poets, tells how a mist of darkness makes it impossible for him to continue a journey to Damascus.¹⁷ In its nature and effect Lehi's mist of darkness conforms to this strange phenomenon most exactly, always bearing in mind that this dream-mist was a super-mist, "exceeding great." A very ancient

Arabic tale recounts how when the Pharaoh of Joseph's time was on an expedition in the desert he found himself "in a dark valley, in which he heard a great outcry, yet he could see no people because of the thick darkness. . . ." There he did a strange thing—he built a great and wonderful castle of light, which was destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Egyptian lands.¹⁸

7. This strongly suggests the picture of "... a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth, on the other side of the river in the dark valley." (1 Ne. 8:26-27.) By now most of us have seen photographs of those wonderful ancient Arab houses (first "discovered" in the 1930's) built after the Babylonian design of Lehi's day, "ten and twelve-story skyscrapers that . . . represent genuine survivals of ancient Babylonian architecture,"¹⁹ with their windows beginning, for the sake of defense, twenty to fifty feet from the ground. At night these lighted windows would certainly give the effect of being suspended above the earth. The eighth book of Hamdani's *al-Iklil* is devoted to describing the early castles of Arabia, "great and spacious buildings" which "stood as it were in the air, high above the earth." "And the castle of Ghumdan," writes Hamdani of one of the most famous, "had twenty stories of upper chambers, one above another. There is disagreement as to its height and breadth, for some say each of its walls measured a thousand by a thousand (i.e., cubits: a "great and spacious building" indeed!), while others say it was greater, and that each of its stories was ten cubits (15 feet) high."²⁰ In Arabic parlance the prime index of elegance and ease in any house or dwelling (including tents) is always "spaciousness."

8. The next picture shows a party going on in the big house: "And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceeding fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit." (1 Ne.

8:27.) As others came and joined the party they also joined in the mockery. (1 Ne. 8:33.) For “. . . the large and spacious building, which my father saw, is vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men. . . .” (1 Ne. 12:18.) “And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw . . . the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceeding great. . . .” (1 Ne. 11:35-36.)

Now speaking of the great castle of Ghumdan, the poet Al-A'asha tells us:

And never was there a more splendid assemblage of people than the people of Ghumdan when they gathered. But dire calamity befell them, even as a wailing woman who has been utterly bereft.²¹

Hamdani gives other accounts of this and other castles, whose legends and whose silent ruins all point to the same moral lesson—the magnificent gathering in the great and spacious building high above the earth is doomed to the destruction reserved for the haughty and the wicked, just as Pharaoh's shining “castle of light” in the desert was said to have been destroyed by the same conqueror who leveled the pride of Jerusalem and Tyre in Lehi's day.

9. The mockery, mimicry and finger-pointing that passed for sport among the smartly-dressed people in the spacious house were directed at a poor little bedraggled band of wanderers, hungrily eating the fruit of the tree that stood nearby and terribly humiliated at having their poverty made an object of public merriment. “And after they had partaken of the fruit of the tree they did cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed” (1 Ne. 8:25), for all the fine people upstairs were “mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come and were partaking of the fruit. And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; . . .” (1 Ne. 8:27-28.)

“The Bedouin in a town appears to be a very dif-

ferent man from the same person in the Desert," writes Burckhardt, "He knows that the townspeople, whom he despises, entertain absurd notions respecting his nation. . . . The wandering Arabs have certainly more wit and sagacity than the people who live in the towns; their heads are more clear, their spirits unimpaired by debauchery . . ." ²² What is more natural than that the "city Arabs" should "mock their desert cousins (whom they secretly envy) with every show of open contempt"? "The 'million' are educated in the towns," a recent observer reports, "and they have always despised the Bedouins, like a certain inhabitant of Jericho whom I met in 1947, who, though quite uneducated himself, made fun of certain poor desert Arabs who were passing by with all their baggage: women, children, camels, chickens, and the rest," ²³ a funny sight indeed. While every visitor is impressed by the pride and nobility of the desert Arab at home and notes his contempt for sedentary life; this contempt is met by equal contempt, and "both sides would consider themselves degraded" by a marriage between the desert people and the dwellers in houses of clay. ²⁴ In town the Arab is, so to speak, on enemy ground, and keenly sensitive to his position. Nobody likes mockery — least of all the proud and touchy Arab.

10. As a result of being scoffed at, the victims beat a retreat in confusion and humiliation: "and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost." (1 Ne. 8:28.) If this seems an extreme reaction to a little loss of face, we need only contemplate a touching inscription cut in the rocks by one who "encamped at this place . . . and he rushed forth in the year in which he was grieved by the scoffing of the people: he drove together and lost the camels . . . Rest to him who leaves (this inscription) untouched!" ²⁵

11. Our snapshots include a number of moving little pictures of parties lost in the desert. Because of the mist of darkness one group "who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost." (1 Ne. 8:23.) Many on their way to the great

and spacious building “were lost from his (Lehi’s) view, wandering in strange roads.” (1 Ne. 8:32.) It is the devil, we are told, who “leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost.” (1 Ne. 12:17.)

Need we say that to get lost in the desert is the chief waking dread and commonest nightmare of the Arab? The first westerner to explore Lehi’s desert in modern times was Edward Robinson, who writes: “On the course northwest we launched forth into the ‘great and terrible wilderness’ . . . the desert, however, could not be said to be pathless; for the many camel-tracks showed that we were on a great road . . .”²⁶ To stray from that broad way, to become separated from one’s party, is fatal. The religious imagery of “going astray” needs no long commentary. “No one will succeed in having his pilgrimage accepted,” says Hariri, “who goes astray from the broad road of rectitude.”²⁷ It is pure insanity to strike off for oneself in a moment of vain glory and self-sufficiency. “He went astray and made a hasty journey,” one inscription recounts, “and O Dusaes, protect him . . . !”²⁸ Another man tells us how “he found traces of his fellows and longed for them,” while being “heavy hearted on account of his brother and on account of his father and on account of his uncle, and he was afraid of the enemy.”²⁹ That is a sad little reminder of how families could get separated forever in the desert. Many of the personal inscriptions in the huge collection of Littmann are messages left behind in the desperate attempt to get in touch with relatives. Typical is No. 156: “By S. . . . and he found the inscription of his uncle, and he longed for him. So, O Allah, peace to him who leaves (this inscription untouched), and relief! . . .”³⁰

12. To symbolize what is utterly inaccessible, Lehi is shown “a great and terrible gulf” (1 Ne. 12:18) “an awful gulf” (1 Ne. 15:28), a tremendous chasm with one’s objective (the tree of life) maddeningly visible on the other side; all who have traveled in the desert know the feeling of utter helplessness and frustration at finding

one's way suddenly cut off by one of those appalling canyons with perpendicular sides — nothing could be more abrupt, more absolute, more baffling to one's plans, and so will it be with the wicked in a day of reckoning. Hariri describes death as "a chasm dread" which sooner or later confronts all mortals.³¹ Many recent photographs show us that Burton was not exaggerating when he described the "titanic walls, lofty donjons, huge projecting bastions, and moats full of deep shade," that are a characteristic of Lehi's desert.³² It is very much like the "red rock" country of our own Southwest.

13. One of the most remarkable of our snapshots is that of a "fountain of filthy water" (1 Ne. 12:16) "... the water which my father saw was filthiness." (1 Ne. 15:27.)

"And . . . many were drowned in the depths of the fountain . . ." (1 Ne. 8:32.) This was a typical desert *sayl*, a raging torrent of liquid filth that sweeps whole camps to destruction. In the year 960 A.D., according to Bar Hebraeus, a large band of pilgrims returning from Mekkah "encamped in the bed of a brook in which water had not flowed for a long time. And during the night, whilst they were sleeping, a flood of water poured down upon them all, and it swept them and all their possessions out into the Great Sea, and they all perished."³³ Even a mounted rider if he is careless may be caught off guard and carried away by such a sudden spate of "filthy water," according to Doughty.³⁴ One of the worst places for these gully-washing torrents of liquid mud is in "the scarred and bare mountains which run parallel to the west coast of Arabia . . . the rainstorms break against this long ridge and produce almost in a moment raging torrents — the Arabic *sail*, spate — which sweep away all obstacles without warning and with loss of life of man and cattle."³⁵ This was the very region through which Lehi traveled on his great trek.

"The situations (for camps) are not always, however, wisely chosen," one observer reports, "for, in more than one instance, a sudden thunderstorm in the hills

has brought a flood down the great valleys, in the bottom of which smaller groups of tents are often found and the water has carried away and drowned the whole settlement, together with its flocks."³⁶ Quite recently a visitor to Arabia has pointed to another interesting scriptural parallel:

A temptation exists to build villages to cater for the needs of the caravan traffic in the wadis (the more fertile parts of the wilderness) which are thought to have permanently dried up. Thus it happens that the parable of the house built upon the sand still finds periodical illustration in actual fact. Recently, after many years of drought and consequent security, one such village near the Yemen road was suddenly obliterated when the wadi filled once again with a raging torrent of water from the mountain.³⁷

The most minute and careful description of such an event is one recorded by a German engineer working in Palestine early in the present century. On May 18, 1913, there occurred a typical flash-flood in which "people from the Bedouin camps, camels, sheep, and also wild animals were swept away and killed by the terribly rapid rising of the floodwaters."³⁸ The engineer, visiting two valleys two days later was impressed more than anything else by the filthiness and mess of the thing. "Thick yellow mud, mixed with desert sand, clung to the bushes on the bank . . . In the freshly-dried desert mud I found dead snakes, lizards, grasshoppers, beetles, shreds of blue cloth that belonged to the Bedouins, a piece of woolen rope and elsewhere small, half-petrified animals. . . ."³⁹ Such storms as this, he says, occur about every ten or twelve years in the desert. Lehi had good reason to worry — and dream — about them! In the inscriptions we read of one who was "driven away from the watering-place of the camels by a torrent, in the year in which the tribe of Qadam drove away the tribe of Harim."⁴⁰ Another inscription is "By A., and the *sail* drove him away at the water-place of the camels."⁴¹ "By An., and the *sail* drove him away at Rass."⁴² Another "abode in the springtime in this valley, in the year in which the torrent passed along with his camels." To which Littmann

appends a note: "It seems that a torrent took away the camels of Sawad. A sudden torrent sometimes tears down tents and seizes upon men and animals."⁴³

Lehi's dreams are summed up in the words of a single brief poem by Rubah who in a few lines describes the terror of loneliness of the long journey, in the mist of darkness (sultry and thick) the "awful gulf," the broad ways, and the paths that stray.⁴⁴

Joseph Smith, Sr., according to his wife, once had the classic dream (as who has not?) of being lost and alone in a vast empty waste, only in his case he "could see nothing save dead, fallen timber."⁴⁵ That is natural enough, for men dream by night only of the things they see by day—that is what makes Lehi's dreams so convincing as authentic testimony. Only one who had actually seen those things could have dreamed them; only one who had been haunted by those fears and frightened by those situations would ever have been visited by them in a dream of the night.

Questions

1. Why are casual and incidental details such as those that abound in Lehi's dreams particularly valuable as evidence?
2. Are the 13 pictures which we have taken from Lehi's dreams peculiar to the Near East?
3. Could they be duplicated in Joseph Smith's own environment? How much of the world had Joseph Smith seen before 1830?
4. Of what part of the world are these dream-pictures characteristic?
5. Is the undertone of anxiety in Lehi's dreams psychologically authentic?
6. What specifically do Lehi's dreams show him to be worrying about?
7. What features of Lehi's dreams remain to be explained? Can you suggest an everyday experience that might furnish material for the iron rod image?

8. Which of the dream images do you find most interesting? Why?

9. What things in Lehi's dreams are characteristic of dreams in general?

10. Why have dreams lost their importance and authority in our society?