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## Lehi and the Arabs

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# 6

## Lehi and the Arabs

Here we discuss Lehi's personal contacts with the Arabs, as indicated by his family background and his association with Ishmael, whose descendants in the New World closely resemble the Ishmaelites (Bedouins) of the Old World. The names of Lehi and some of his sons are pure Arabic. The Book of Mormon depicts Lehi as a man of three worlds, and it has recently become generally recognized that the ancient Hebrews shared fully in the culture and traditions of the desert on the one hand and in the cultural heritage of Egypt on the other.

Lehi's ties with the Arabs are many and interesting. Since the only comprehensive study of this theme is a chapter of *Lehi in the Desert*, we can do no better in this lesson than to quote that chapter, with necessary alterations and additions.

### **Significance of Manasseh**

Now of all the tribes of Israel, Manasseh was the one which lived farthest out in the desert, came into the most frequent contact with the Arabs, intermarried with them most frequently, and at the same time had the closest traditional bonds with Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The prominence of the name of Ammon in the Book of Mormon may have something to do with the fact that Ammon was Manasseh's nearest neighbor and often fought him in the deserts east of Jordan; at the same time a prehistoric connection with the Ammon of Egypt is not at all out of the question. The seminomadic nature of Manasseh might explain why Lehi seems out of touch with things in Jerusalem. For the first time he "did discover" from records kept in Laban's house that he was

a direct descendant of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:16). Why hadn't he known that all along? Nephi always speaks of "the Jews who were at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:13) with a curious detachment, and no one in 1 Nephi ever refers to them as "the people" or "our people" but always quite impersonally as "the Jews." It is interesting in this connection that the Elephantine letters speak only of Jews and Arameans, never of Israelites.<sup>2</sup>

### **"Call Me Ishmael"**

The proverbial ancestor of the Arabs is Ishmael. His is one of the few Old Testament names which is also at home in ancient Arabia.<sup>3</sup> His traditional homeland was the Tih, the desert between Palestine and Egypt, and his people were haunters of the "borders" between the desert and the town;<sup>4</sup> he was regarded as the legitimate offspring of Abraham by an Egyptian mother. His was not a name of good omen, for the angel promised his mother, "he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every one, and every man's hand against him."<sup>5</sup> So the chances are that one who bore his name had good family reasons for doing so, and in Lehi's friend Ishmael we surely have a man of the desert. Lehi, faced with the prospect of a long journey in the wilderness, sent back for Ishmael, who promptly followed him into the desert with a large party (1 Nephi 7:2-5). Lehi's family charged him with irresponsibility and lack of candor in leading them out into the wastes, and in view of what they had to suffer and what they left behind, they were, from the common-sense point of view, quite right. The decision to depart into the wilderness came suddenly to Lehi, by a dream (1 Nephi 2:2). In the same way, "the Lord commanded him that I, Nephi, and my brethren, should again return unto the land of Jerusalem, and bring down Ishmael and his family into the wilderness (1 Nephi 7:2).

Here there is no personal appeal of Lehi to Ishmael; no long arguments, discussions, or explanations; no long prep-

aration and planning: Ishmael immediately moves into the desert, "and all the house of Ishmael" (1 Nephi 7:22), though his sons complained as bitterly as Laman and Lemuel (1 Nephi 7:6). This means that he must have been hardly less adept at moving than Lehi himself. The interesting thing is that Nephi takes Ishmael (unlike Zoram) completely for granted, never explaining who he is or how he fits into the picture—the act of sending for him seems to be the most natural thing in the world, as does the marriage of his daughters with Lehi's sons. Since it has ever been the custom among the desert people for a man to marry the daughter of his paternal uncle (*bint al-ammi*)<sup>6</sup> it is hard to avoid the impression that Lehi and Ishmael were related. Yet, it is significant that Ishmael's descendants, Arab fashion, always retained a separate tribal identity (Jacob 1:13; Alma 47:35; 4 Nephi 1:38; Mormon 1:8-9), which strongly implies that their ancestral heritage was different—without a proud and independent tradition of their own they could hardly have preserved, as they apparently did, an independent tribal identity throughout the whole course of Book of Mormon history.<sup>7</sup>

### **Ishmaelites of Two Worlds**

If it was common in the early days for antiquarians in America, being mostly ministers, to compare the Red Indians with the Hebrews, it has ever been the custom of a more critical class of observers down to the present time to compare them with the Bedouins of the East. Two hundred years ago Harmer wrote:

In the smallness of their clans, and in their terribleness to those of a more settled kind of life, there is some resemblance between the Arabs and the Indians of North America; shall we suppose there is a conformity between the Emirs of the one and the Sachems of the other, as to the *slovenliness* in the way of living?

Then he presents a description of the good and bad

points of the Bedouin that match those of the Indian in every detail.<sup>8</sup> Sir Richard Burton, one of the few men who have lived both among the Bedouins and the Indians, marvels that two people so much alike on all points could have had no common background; it just goes to prove, he concludes, that life under similar conditions will beget identical cultures,<sup>9</sup> a statement which has been exhaustively disproven since it was made. Whatever the connection, it is certain that life in a wild country confirmed the wild ways of the Lamanites. For example, "*it was the practice* of these Lamanites to stand by the waters of Sebus to scatter the flocks of the people, that thereby they might drive away many that were scattered unto their own land, it being a practice of plunder among them" (Alma 18:7; italics added). If ever there was an authentic piece of Bedouin mischief that is it. And of course it led to fights and reprisals in the best desert manner (Alma 18:6). Among others these rascals scattered the flocks of their own king and yet continued active in the social and political life of the community—how weak and poorly organized a government, and how typical of the East! (Alma 17:26-27; 19:21).

But the Nephites as well as the Lamanites continued their desert ways. Shortly after landing in America, Nephi himself took his tents and all who would follow him and continued his wanderings in the new land as in the old (2 Nephi 5:5). The great man in his old age still speaks the language of the desert: "I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road" (2 Nephi 4:32-33) is the purest Bedouin talk for "May I stick to the *wady* and not get off the clearly marked mainline that everyone follows!" One hears the echo of innumerable old desert inscriptions in his prayer: "O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine

enemy" (2 Nephi 4:33). The immemorial desert custom which required a sheikh to place the edge of his robe (*kuffah*) over the back of anyone seeking his protection is clearly recalled in Nephi's cry: "O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!" (2 Nephi 4:33).

There is a remarkable association between the names of Lehi and Ishmael which ties them both to the southern desert, where the legendary birthplace and central shrine of Ishmael was at a place called Beer Lehai-ro'i.<sup>10</sup> Wellhausen rendered the name "spring of the wild-ox jaw-bone," but Paul Haupt showed that Lehi (for so he reads the name) does not mean "jaw" but "cheek,"<sup>11</sup> which leaves the meaning of the strange compound still unclear. One thing is certain however: that Lehi is a personal name. Until recently this name was entirely unknown save as a place name, but now it has turned up at Elath and elsewhere in the south in a form which has been identified by Nelson Glueck with the name Lahai which "occurs quite frequently either as a part of a compound, or as a separate name of a deity or a person, particularly in Minaean, Thamudic, and Arabic texts."<sup>12</sup> There is a Beit Lahi, "House of Lehi," among the ancient place names of the Arab country around Gaza, but the meaning of the name has here been lost.<sup>13</sup> If the least be said of it, the name *Lehi* is thoroughly at home among the people of the desert and, so far as we know, nowhere else.

The name of Lemuel is not a conventional Hebrew one, for it occurs only in one chapter of the Old Testament (Proverbs 31:1, 4), where it is commonly supposed to be a rather mysterious poetic substitute for Solomon. It is, however, like Lehi, at home in the south desert, where an Edomite text from "a place occupied by tribes descended from Ishmael" bears the title, "The Words of Lemuel, King of Massa."<sup>14</sup> These people, though speaking a language that was almost Arabic, were yet well within the sphere of Jewish religion, for "we have nowhere else any evidence for

saying that the Edomites used any other peculiar name for their God" than "Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews."<sup>15</sup>

Laman's name is discussed below.<sup>16</sup> It is a striking coincidence that Conder saw in the name *Leimun*, as he renders it (the vowels must be supplied by guesswork), a possible corruption of the name Lemuel, thus bringing these two names, so closely associated in the Book of Mormon, into the most intimate relationship.<sup>17</sup> Far more popular among the Arabs as among the Nephites was the name Alma, which can mean a young man, a coat of mail, a mountain, or a sign.<sup>18</sup> While Sam is a perfectly good Egyptian name, it is also the normal Arabic form of Shem, the son of Noah.

### Lehi's Three Worlds

Lehi, like Moses and his ancestor Joseph, was a man of *three* cultures, being educated not only in "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2), but in the ways of the desert as well. "There is a peculiar color and atmosphere to the biblical life," says Professor Montgomery, "which gives it its special tone. . . . And that touch comes from the expanses and the free-moving life of what we call Arabia."<sup>19</sup> The dual culture of Egypt and Israel would have been impossible without the all-important Arab to be the link between, just as trade between the two nations was unthinkable without the Bedouin to guide their caravans through his deserts. Without the sympathetic cooperation of the Arabs, any passage through their deserts was a terrible risk, if not out of the question, and the good businessman was ever the one who knew how to deal with the Arabs — which meant to be one of them.<sup>20</sup>

It should be noted in speaking of names that archaeology has fully demonstrated that the Israelites, then as now, had not the slightest aversion to giving their children non-Jewish names, even when those names smacked of a

pagan background.<sup>21</sup> One might, in a speculative mood, even detect something of Lehi's personal history in the names he gave to his sons. The first two have Arabic names – do they recall his early days in the caravan trade? The second two have Egyptian names, and indeed they were born in the days of his prosperity. The last two, born amid tribulations in the desert, were called with fitting humility, Jacob and Joseph. Whether the names of the first four were meant, as those of the last two sons certainly were (2 Nephi 2:1; 3:1), to call to mind the circumstances under which they were born, the names are certainly a striking indication of their triple heritage, and it was certainly the custom of Lehi's people to name their children with a purpose (Helaman 3:21; 5:6).

### **Lehi at Home in the Desert**

There is ample evidence in the Book of Mormon that Lehi was an expert on caravan travel, as one might expect. Consider a few general points. Upon receiving a warning dream, he is ready apparently at a moment's notice to take his whole "family, and provisions, and tents" out into the wilderness. While he took absolutely nothing but the most necessary provisions with him (1 Nephi 2:4), he knew exactly what those provisions should be, and when he had to send back to the city to supply unanticipated wants, it was for records that he sent and not for any necessities for the journey. This argues a high degree of preparation and knowledge in the man, as does the masterly way in which he established a base camp; that is, until the day when he receives the Liahona, he seems to know just where he is going and exactly what he is doing: there is here no talk of being "led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand" (1 Nephi 4:6), as with Nephi in the dark streets of Jerusalem.

His family accuse Lehi of folly in leaving Jerusalem and do not spare his personal feelings in making fun of his dreams and visions, yet they never question his ability to



lead them. They complain, like all Arabs, against the terrible and dangerous deserts through which they pass, but they do not include ignorance of the desert among their hazards, though that would be their first and last objection to his wild project were Lehi nothing but a city Jew unacquainted with the wild and dangerous world of the waste places.

Lehi himself never mentions inexperience among his handicaps. Members of the family laugh contemptuously when Nephi proposes to build a ship (1 Nephi 17:17-20), and might well have quoted the ancient proverb, "Do not show an Arab the sea or to a Sidonian the desert, for their work is different."<sup>22</sup> But while they tell him he is "lacking in judgment" (1 Nephi 17:19) to build a ship, they never mock their brother's skill as a hunter or treat him as a dude in the desert. The fact that he brought a fine steel bow with him *from home* and that he knew well how to use that difficult weapon shows that Nephi had hunted much in his short life.

Lehi has strong ties with the desert both in his family and his tribal background. Twenty-six hundred years ago the Jews felt themselves much closer to the people of the desert than they have in subsequent times. "We come to realize," says Montgomery, "that Israel had its face turned towards those quarters we call the Desert, and that this was its nearest neighbor." The Jews themselves were desert people originally, and they never forgot it: "This constant seeping-in of desert wanderers still continues. . . . There is no barrier of race or language or caste or religion" between them and their desert cousins.<sup>23</sup>

### **Lehi's Desert Background**

Ever since the days of Sir Robert Wood, scholars have been pointing out the close parallels that exist between the way of life peculiar to the wandering Bedouins of the East and that of the ancient patriarchs, especially Abraham.<sup>24</sup> "Rightly do the legends of Israel depict the father of the

nation as living in tents," says a typical commentary, "for nomadizing is the proper business of the genuine old Hebrews, and indeed of the Semites in general."<sup>25</sup> Hugo Winckler pointed out that whereas the cities of Palestine were all in the north, the country of Judah was really Bedouin territory, being "the link between northern Arabia and the Sinai peninsula with their Bedouin life."<sup>26</sup> Since Thomas Harmer, in 1776, attempted to test the authenticity of the Bible by making a close and detailed comparison between its description of desert ways and the actual practices of the Bedouins, hundreds of studies have appeared on that fruitful theme, and they are still being written.<sup>27</sup> In one of the latest, Hölischer discovers that the word *Arab* as used in the Old Testament "designates originally no particular tribe, but simply the nomadic Bedouins. In this sense the ancestors of the Israelites were also Arabs before they settled down on cultivated ground."<sup>28</sup>

### A Mixed Culture

But though their nomadic practices were by no means terminated by agricultural ones, we must not fall into the error of thinking of the ancient patriarchs as desert nomads and nothing more. The discovery made in the 1930s that Abraham was a dweller in houses as well as a dweller in tents "came as a great surprise," though it could hardly have surprised readers of the Pearl of Great Price. The fact is that both the city and the wilderness figure prominently in the story of God's people from the beginning. Winckler showed years ago that the Bedouins have been in constant contact with the cities throughout history, while the city-dwellers of the East have always gone forth into the waste on business of various kinds.<sup>29</sup> There is indeed constant conflict between the two ways of life: but conflict also means contact, and in the Book of Mormon as in the Bible the city and the wilderness are always wonderfully close together.

In Bible times as today one could literally step from an

ancient and crowded metropolis into a howling wilderness in the course of a short half-hour stroll!<sup>30</sup> This state of things that seems so fantastic to us is actually typical of the East in every period. Lachish letter No. 6, in denouncing the prophet Jeremiah for spreading defeatism both in the country and in the city, shows that Lehi, a supporter of the prophet, could have been active in either area of "the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 3:10). The fact that Lehi "dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days" (1 Nephi 1:4) would be an aid rather than a hindrance to much travel, for "the wilderness of Judah is a long projection north from the Arabian deserts to the gates of Jerusalem."<sup>31</sup>

### **The Language of the Desert in the Book of Mormon**

So the patriarchs of old were wandering Bedouins, though far from barbaric. Their language was that of the desert people, many of whose words are to this day closer to Hebrew than to modern Arabic.<sup>32</sup> As recently as 2000 B.C. Hebrew and Arabic had not yet emerged from "what was substantially a common language, understood from the Indian Ocean to the Taurus and from the Zagros to the frontier of Egypt. This common language and other possible extinct Semitic tongues (excluding Accadian) was probably almost as homogeneous as was Arabic a thousand years ago."<sup>33</sup> A curious persistent homogeneity of culture and language has characterized the people of the Near East in every age, so that Margoliouth can affirm that "a Sabeian [South Arabian] would in fact have found little to puzzle him in the first verse of Genesis."<sup>34</sup> "The Hebrews remained Arabs," is the verdict of a modern authority. "Their literature . . . in its recorded forms, is of Arab scheme and type."<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising that Professor Margoliouth holds that Arabic seems to hold "the key to every lock" in the study of the Old Testament. It certainly is indispensable

to the study of Lehi's activities and background in his native country.

One interesting linguistic tie between Israel and the Arabs should not be overlooked since it has direct application to the Book of Mormon. We refer to those Hebrew genealogies in which "the nomenclature is largely un-Hebraic, with peculiar antique formations in *-an*, *-on*, and in some cases of particular Arabian origin."<sup>36</sup> "The loss of the ending *on* is quite common in Palestinian place-names," according to Albright, referring to places mentioned in Egyptian records.<sup>37</sup> One can recall any number of Book of Mormon place names—Emron, Heshlon, Jashon, Moron, etc., that have preserved this archaic *-on*, indicative of a quaint conservatism among Lehi's people, and especially of ties with the desert people.

### Place-names in the Desert

Lehi's intimacy with desert practices becomes apparent right at the outset of his journey, not only in the skillful way he managed things but also in the quaint and peculiar practices he observed, such as those applying to the naming of places in the desert.

The stream at which he made his first camp Lehi named after his eldest son; the valley, after his second son (1 Nephi 2:8). The oasis at which his party made their next important camp "we did call . . . Shazer" (1 Nephi 16:13). The fruitful land by the sea "we called Bountiful," while the sea itself "we called Irreantum" (1 Nephi 17:5).

By what right do these people rename streams and valleys to suit themselves? By the immemorial custom of the desert, to be sure. 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 or in the territory of another tribe, is named after you."<sup>38</sup> 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 *wady* running close to the same, or the mountain connected with it, will naturally be called differently by different clans," according to Canaan,<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

This confusing 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 themselves their own camps, or unconsciously confounded a native name in their carelessness."<sup>41</sup> 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 explorers in our own times started to make official maps.

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, for Thomas reports from the south country that "as is commonly the case in these mountains, the water bears a different name from the wadi."<sup>42</sup> Likewise the Book of Mormon follows the Arabic system of designating Lehi's camp not by the name of the river by which it stood (for rivers may easily dry up), but rather by the name of the valley (1 Nephi 10:16; 16:6).

In closing we may note the increasing tendency of recent years to equate Hebrew and Arab. Guillaume concludes his study with the dictum that the two names are actually derived from a common original, the name of Eber, both alike signifying "sons of Eber."<sup>43</sup> According to Albright, "no sharp distinction is made between Hebrews, Aramaeans, and Arabs in the days of the Patriarchs" — they were all one common culture and race: the people of the desert.<sup>44</sup>

## Questions

1. How does the figure of Ishmael support the authenticity of Nephi's record?
2. What is significant about Lehi's connection with Manasseh?
3. What considerations make one hesitate to see in the close resemblance of the American Indians to the Bedouins a pure coincidence?
4. What indications are there that Lehi himself was a man of the desert?
5. How can one explain the Arabic names of Lehi and his sons? Why not Hebrew?
6. What is now claimed regarding the relationship of Hebrews and Arabs?
7. What is significant in the triple cultural heritage of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Lehi? How many cultures are represented in our Mormon heritage?
8. What indications are there in the Book of Mormon that Lehi was a man at home in the desert?
9. Is it possible for such a man to live in the city? On a farm?
10. What indications are there in the Book of Mormon that Lehi spoke the language of the desert? How would that language be related to his own native tongue?