



Type: Book Chapter

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Source: *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*

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Published: Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon
Studies, Brigham Young University, 2004

Page(s): 611–624



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Chapter 21

THE RECHABITES: A MODEL GROUP IN LEHI'S WORLD

Jeffrey P. Thompson and John W. Welch

One of the most enigmatic groups briefly mentioned in the Old Testament is the Rechabites. Although (and perhaps precisely because) only a few references to them exist in the entire Old Testament, people throughout the centuries have been fascinated by this extraordinary family group, and scholars have dug for clues in the Bible to explain who they were and where they came from. While many questions remain unanswered about this interesting group, it can be assumed with some confidence that Lehi and Nephi would have been familiar with the Rechabites, if not in person, at least by their general reputation for leading a righteous, covenant-based life in their tents out in the wilderness away from the wickedness in Jerusalem. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that Lehi and his followers may have modeled their behavior in certain respects after this exemplary group of pious but eccentric Israelites.

Several similarities between the Rechabites and the Lehites can be observed. Some are superficial and ordinary; others are interesting and intriguing. Taken together, the few bits

and pieces of information that we have about the Rechabites provide evidence that Lehi's group was not completely idiosyncratic or that their behavior would not have been viewed as completely aberrational in the world of Jerusalem in the late seventh century.

In the Wilderness

As early as 1957, Hugh Nibley saw a connection between the Rechabites and the Lehites. In *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, Nibley characterized the sons of Rechab as "typical of the back-to-the-wilderness movements among the Jews in every age" and suggested that they (and Lehi's group like them) would have been counted "as traitors and outlaws" for having deserted and separated themselves from the holy city of Jerusalem.¹ Nibley argued that Jonadab ben Rekhab and his followers had gone out into the desert "to recapture the spirit of [the ideal Israelite] time,"² recalling the years when Israel, having been delivered out of Egypt, was led through the wilderness by God's hovering cloud by day and by his pillar of fire at night. This image invites us to expand on Nibley's suggestion: perhaps, when Lehi saw in vision a "pillar of fire" that came and dwelt on a rock before him (1 Nephi 1:6), his mind was already turning or being directed toward the wilderness, to live like the ancient Israelites in the desert or like the contemporaneous Rechabites in some removed place of refuge away from the wickedness and impending destruction of Jerusalem.

Nibley also linguistically linked Nephite culture to Jonadab the Rechabite on two intriguing but inconclusive grounds: the personal name suffix *-nadab* also appears at the end of the Book of Mormon name of Aminadab, and, in general, "the Rekhabite teachings are strangely like those in the Book

of Mormon.” From such clues Nibley concluded that “one is forced to admit at very least the possibility that Lehi’s exodus *could* have taken place in the manner described, and the certainty that other such migrations actually did take place.”³ Nevertheless, the Rechabites remained for Nibley and for us today a “strange and baffling” group, especially as they come to be represented in later traditions associated with messianic expectations.⁴

A Model of Obedience

How the Rechabite group originated is obscure; some have called it “a mystery.”⁵ Hints of the origins of the Rechabites are given in 2 Kings and 1 Chronicles, assuming that these texts are speaking of the same group. Back in the ninth century, King Jehu encountered Jehonadab (Jonadab) while traveling toward Mount Carmel and invited him to accompany him and witness his destructive attack on the priests of Baal (2 Kings 10). We can infer from this story, as is also certainly implied in Jeremiah’s description of the Rechabites and their reputation for obedience (Jeremiah 35), that these people were known, to a considerable degree, for their pious loyalty to Yahweh.

The only glimpses we have of this obedient group in Lehi’s day come from Jeremiah 35. Acting on the Lord’s command, “presumably in 599 or 598,”⁶ Jeremiah invited the Rechabites to the temple, a place with which they may have been deeply associated,⁷ as an example of an obedient people. When Jeremiah offered them wine, they refused declaring, “We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever” (Jeremiah 35:6). The Rechabites added to this stipulation the command of their father that they were not to be bound to any property, that they were not to “build

house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers” (Jeremiah 35:7). The Lord himself contrasted the obedience of the Rechabites (who obeyed their father) with the disobedience of the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: “Ye have not inclined your ear, nor hearkened unto me. . . . this people hath not hearkened unto me: . . . saith the Lord God of hosts” (Jeremiah 35:15–17). For their obedience the Rechabites were blessed: “Because ye have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according unto all that he hath commanded you: therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me for ever” (Jeremiah 35:18–19).

Saliently, Jeremiah admired the Rechabites for their obedience to the righteous commandments given by Jonadab, their father, and he wished that all of Israel would obey God with the same degree of diligence. No attentive reader of 1 Nephi could miss the similar emphasis placed by Nephi on the principle of obeying the personalized commandments of God issued by a righteous father: Receiving a command of God from his father, Nephi set his face like flint: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (1 Nephi 3:7). Later in the wilderness he again testified “that the commandments of God must be fulfilled” and that if “the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them” (1 Nephi 17:3).

Semiurbanized Nomads

Although connected with Jerusalem, both groups seem to have taken up a nomadic or seminomadic lifestyle to distance

themselves from the corruptions of city life. We do not know why the Rechabites chose to live away from major towns or cities, but Lehi was instructed by the Lord to take his family and dwell in the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:2) because of the impending destruction of the city (1 Nephi 1:8–13). Nephi made repeated mention of the fact that Lehi dwelt in a tent during this time: “And my father dwelt in a tent” (1 Nephi 2:15; 9:1; 10:16; 16:6; see also 2:6; 3:1; 4:38; 5:7; 7:5, 21, 22; 16:10), which seems to signal something of social significance.⁸ His family packed and departed into the desert where they initially set up a camp, like the Rechabites, not in Jerusalem, but close enough so they could return several times to the city to seek records and Ishmael’s family (1 Nephi 3–5, 7). This lifestyle allowed them needed mobility and freedom of movement. In this way, Lehi’s family spent approximately eight years in the desert (1 Nephi 17:4). Once in the land of promise, Nephi again would “flee into the wilderness” with those who would go with him (2 Nephi 5:5). This pattern of escaping as seminomads into the wilderness, even with flocks, continues well into the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 23:1–3).

Such a temporary lifestyle seems to parallel the regular behavior of the Rechabites, whose code of conduct specifically required that “all your days ye shall dwell in tents” (Jeremiah 35:7). Because of their tent dwelling and their avoidance of agriculture, some scholars have labeled the Rechabites as nomads.⁹ Scholars have recognized different kinds of nomadic living in the ancient Near East. The first is the “true nomad or Bedouin” who dwells in the desert and relies solely on the camel. This group has little or no contact with cities. The second breeds sheep and goats and thus is required to move and live where there is rainfall and will usually have some contact with settlements. The third lives a seminomad and semiurban

lifestyle. In addition to sheep and goats, this group raises cattle, cultivates a few simple crops, and has some contact with established city centers.¹⁰ Both the Rechabites and the Lehighes seem to fit into the second or third group. The Lehighes led a more nomadic style of life during their years of trekking through the Arabian Peninsula and later became more settled in the land of Bountiful.

Family Orientation

Both groups made honorific use of the names of their patriarchal founder and also of their guiding teacher. The “house of the Rechabites” had taken their name from an ancestor named Rechab (Jeremiah 35:18). Their way of life, however, seems to have originated with Jehonadab, Rechab’s son or descendant, for they had “obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab our father in all that he hath charged us” (Jeremiah 35:8).¹¹ In this group, one ancestor gave the group its name, and another was key in mandating their lifestyle. In the case of the Nephites, something similar occurred, although not until after their settlement in the New World: Lehi was the initial leader of the group and was responsible for their exodus from Jerusalem, while Nephi was the son who shaped their way of life. His followers quickly and easily took their name from his as “the people of Nephi” (2 Nephi 5:9).

Each group was composed of a closely knit full family group. The Rechabites consisted of wives, sons, daughters, and fathers (Jeremiah 35:3, 5, 8). This was a family organization, a type of tribe or clan. Whether there were nonrelatives who joined is not clear; but at least a substantial number, if not all, seem to have been of the same bloodline. Notably, the Rechabites, when they left the wilderness and moved nearer to Jerusalem as Nebuchadnezzar later was invading the land,

may have picked up a few outsiders, for the Rechabites appear to have invited others to come up with them at that time (Jeremiah 35:11). Similarly, Lehi's group also consisted initially of a single family. Ishmael's family and Zoram then joined the clan as they fled from danger (1 Nephi 7:2–5; 4:35). It is possible that Ishmael and Lehi were related to each other; soon Ishmael's daughters became the wives of Lehi's sons and of Zoram, and hence they and their children all became part of the family of Lehi (1 Nephi 16:7; 2 Nephi 1–4).

The Rechabites were not gender or age specific; they were not ascetic monks, as they are sometimes cast in light of later Christian narratives.¹² “Wives . . . sons . . . [and] daughters” all lived the Rechabite lifestyle (Jeremiah 35:8), negating the idea that it was a type of monastic life. Lehi's departing group was also organized as a tribe or clan. Following the Lord's command, Lehi took his wife, sons, and daughters with him; the group later included Ishmael's family, whose daughters would become wives for his sons (1 Nephi 2:2–4; 7:1–6; 2 Nephi 5:6).

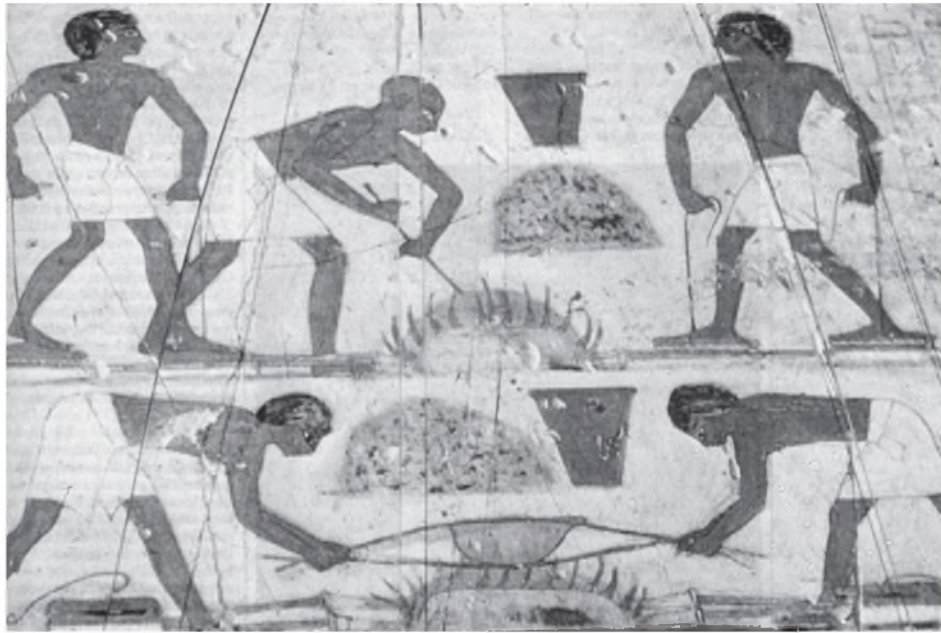
Sufficient Means

Both the Rechabites and Lehi appear to have been wealthy, having sufficient means. The Rechabites had no fields or vineyards, which meant that they had no means of food production aside from maintaining flocks (something that apparently was not prohibited to them) or some other source of income. Jehonadab's name may even indicate he came originally from the upper class. His name is based on “a variant of the divine name Yahweh” and “the triliteral Hebrew root *n-d-b*.”¹³ This root has the sense of being “generous” or “noble” and may refer to a member of aristocracy.¹⁴ We know more certainly that Lehi was quite wealthy, for he left “gold and silver, and all manner of riches” behind at his home in Jerusalem (1 Nephi 3:16). The

amount of wealth was so “exceedingly great” that when Laban saw it he “did lust” after it (1 Nephi 3:25). Lehi, too, appears to have been a prominent member of Jerusalem society, although it is not clear how he might have been related to the ruling class. The fact that Nephi and his brothers had easy access to Laban, who evidently held a high social position as guardian of the precious brass plates and had command of fifty men (1 Nephi 3:3, 24, 31), further reflects Lehi’s adequate economic status.

Metallurgists?

Another possible parallel, also related to economics and commerce, has to do with metallurgy. Clues in the Bible suggest that the Rechabites were familiar with and practiced metalworking.¹⁵ Several historians have assumed that the Rechabites were involved in some kind of metallurgical craft or trade. “The families of the scribes which dwelt at Jabez; the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, and Suchathites. These are the *Kenites* that came of Hemath, the father of the house of Rechab” (1 Chronicles 2:55, emphasis added). The name Kenites is derived from the Semitic root *qyn*, which denotes “fabrication” or “ironworking.” In some cases, it is translated as “smiths.”¹⁶ In his discussion on the ancient smith, R. J. Forbes draws some parallels with the Rechabites and points out that they may have formed a guild. In preindustrial societies, technical knowledge was carefully protected and handed down from generation to generation. Frick adds that “the smith had to be familiar with many technical procedures, the knowledge of which was handed down and guarded jealously from one generation to the next.”¹⁷ Typically, such guilds lasted for many years, even sometimes centuries, in part because guilds often consisted solely of family members.¹⁸ The Rechabites seem to behave in such a familial way. Another marked characteristic of smiths was their itinerant nature.



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Egyptian metalsmiths refining copper by pushing the bellows with their feet to provide the draught of air to the furnace. (Wall-painting in the tomb of Rekh-mi-re^c, Thebes ca. 1470 B.C.)

They would stay and work in one spot until the ore or fuel was exhausted and then move on. This could also explain why the Rechabites never built homes or planted fields.¹⁹

Nephi appears to be familiar with metallurgy, as has been suggested, especially by John Tvedtnes.²⁰ When he is at Irreantum he is commanded by the Lord to “construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee” (1 Nephi 17:8). Nephi then proceeds to ask “Lord, whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools” (1 Nephi 17:9). It has been noted that Nephi did not ask how to make tools, nor did the Lord say he would show Nephi how to make them. Nephi only asked to find the ore so he could make them. This would seem to indicate that Nephi already had the necessary knowledge to make tools. He evidently already knew how to make bellows out of hides without information from the Lord (1 Nephi 17:11). If, as Forbes suggests, metallurgical knowledge was highly guarded, then Nephi must

have been taught by a family member or friend—possibly even by someone like a Rechabite, although this cannot be known with any certainty. It is interesting, however, that the Lord did not need to show Nephi how to make the tools just as he showed him how to make the ship. Also noteworthy is the fact that Laman and Lemuel mocked Nephi for trying to build a ship, but nothing was mentioned about his making tools (1 Nephi 17:17–18).

Covenantal Piety

Another similar quality between the two groups is that both appear to have been living a particular law of piety based on a vow or covenant. The Rechabites, we are told, were known for their complete abstinence from wine, for they followed Jehonadab's command that they "drink no wine, neither [they], nor [their] sons for ever" (Jeremiah 35:6, 18).²¹ The command was apparently respected by all the Rechabites. Abstinence was not practiced by all the Israelites and was viewed as somewhat peculiar. Only a handful of persons in the Old Testament have been identified as abstaining from wine—most notably the sons of Aaron who held the Levitical priesthood when they were officiating in their duties (Leviticus 10:9) and those who swore the Nazarite vow, such as Samson (Numbers 6:3; Judges 13:4). Both the priests and the Nazarites clearly lived this way in order to maintain a higher level of spirituality and to properly serve God. Lehi and his family were also living a higher law of the gospel. Lehi was the recipient of several magnificent visions, but most importantly, Lehi and his family were deemed righteous enough to be spared the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem. Whether Lehi's family drank no wine is unclear, but chastity, honesty, and keeping all the Lord's commandments were required and desirable characteristics of Lehi's clan (2 Nephi 9:31–38; Jacob 2:28).

Both groups grounded their religious obligations in a covenant with the Lord. The Rechabites had been promised that if

they did not drink wine, build homes, or plant fields, they would “live many days in the land where [they were] strangers” (Jeremiah 35:7). The Lord assured them eternally that, because of their obedience, “Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me for ever” (Jeremiah 35:19). Perhaps this promise of the Lord alone motivated their stalwartness in keeping their father’s commandments. The Lord’s promise to Lehi was similar, namely that “inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led” (1 Nephi 17:13) and that they would “prosper” in the promised land (2 Nephi 1:9). This undoubtedly provided a similar stimulus for the Nephites to be righteous.

Trust in the Lord

In the end, both groups remained calm and confident that the Lord would keep his promises and protect them in the face of serious danger. The Old Testament does not reveal why the Rechabites returned to the vicinity of Jerusalem when they received information about Nebuchadnezzar’s plans to invade the land of Judah; but even in the face of impending attack, they maintained their righteousness, came up to the temple, and kept their faith in the Lord.

Lehi and his family, likewise, remained confident and obedient, although in a different way. They knew of the impending destruction of Jerusalem, about which Lehi had read unmistakably in the book shown to him in vision (1 Nephi 1:13). Still, they left their home and went forth, trusting in the Lord, knowing that his “power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth,” and that those who will come to God shall not perish (1 Nephi 1:14).

Above all, Lehi knew of the coming of “a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4). As Nibley notes above, and as has been discussed elsewhere, the Rechabites

become the subject of later Jewish and Christian histories and legends that associate them with messianic expectations, looking forward to the time when God will reestablish his righteous covenant with a reunited Israel. Found in several versions, the *History of the Rechabites* is an early Christian text, based on a much earlier Jewish tradition that tells how the Rechabites were led from Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity to a land across the ocean, having several experiences similar to Lehi's.²² Whether this religious lore has any historical connection with Lehi and his covenantal group similarly living in a state of messianic expectation and apocalyptic anticipation remains uncertain, but the possibility cannot be completely discounted.

In conclusion, there are many interesting comparisons between the Rechabites and Lehi and his family. Both groups lived more in accord with righteous principles than their fellow Israelites. The two groups certainly could have known each other, since they did live in or around Jerusalem at the same time. Depending on many unknown factors, the Rechabites and Lehiites may have had even more in common than these surviving glimpses disclose. Both were, in their own ways, part of the dispersion of Israel in which the Lord leads "away the righteous into precious lands" (1 Nephi 17:38), "scattered upon all the face of the earth" (1 Nephi 10:12).

NOTES

The first draft of this chapter was prepared by Jeffrey P. Thompson, a law student assistant working with John W. Welch at the J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University. Robert D. Hunt contributed additions.

1. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 151.

2. *Ibid.*, 146.

3. Ibid., 69.
4. Ibid., 68.
5. Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Clark, 2003), 124.
6. John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 190.
7. Barker, *Great High Priest*, 29, 124, surmises a connection between the name Rechab and a memory of the *merkavah*, the chariot-throne in the temple.
8. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 243.
9. Frank S. Frick, "Rechab," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:631; see also Frank S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977), 211–17.
10. Frick, *City in Ancient Israel*, 189–90 at 189. See also Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:3–4.
11. The term *ben* or *son of* can mean son or descendant; see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 120–21.
12. See *Narrative of Zosimus*, concluding sections; Barker, *Great High Priest*, says "ascetics," 28, and "monastic," 124.
13. Frick, "Rechab," 631.
14. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 621; see also Frick, "Rechab," 631.
15. See R. J. Forbes, *Metallurgy in Antiquity: A Notebook for Archaeologists and Technologists* (Leiden: Brill, 1950), 64–68, 98. See also Frick, "Rechab," 631; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 125. Frick discusses the Rechabites' association with Ir-nahash in the genealogical lists in 1 Chronicles 4 and with the Kenites in 1 Chronicles 2:55. Both the father Ir-nahash and the Kenite clan were involved in metallurgy.
16. Brown, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 883–84. See also Frick, "Rechab," 631.
17. Frick, "Rechab," 631. Frick also discusses this behavior in

relation to their abstinence and nomadism, writing that such “measures . . . were designed to guard the secrets of the trade.”

18. Ibid.

19. Forbes, *Metallurgy*, 64–68; see also Frick, “Rechab,” 631–32.

20. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 94–97.

21. Although only wine was prohibited, it is assumed that abstinence from all alcohol was practiced since all scriptures in the Old Testament that discuss abstinence preclude both wine and strong drink (see Leviticus 10:9; Numbers 6:3; Judges 13:4, 14).

22. John W. Welch, “The Narrative of Zosimus (History of the Rechabites) and the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 323–74, citing several scholarly sources regarding this body of literature; to that material should now be added Chris H. Knights, “A Century of Research into the Story/Apocalypse of Zosimus and/or the History of the Rechabites,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 15 (1997): 53–66; and “*The History of the Rechabites—An Initial Commentary*,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 28/4 (1997): 413–36.