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Lehi in the Desert, Part IX—A Word About Plates

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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 ninth part discusses the use of metal plates in recordkeeping in the Near East.

Lehi

IN THE DESERT

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IX

A WORD ABOUT PLATES

WE have seen how the ruler of Tyre, to score a point in bargaining with Wenamon, had his family records and accounts brought out and read to him. In the Amarna tablets the *Rabu* of one small Palestinian city writes to a neighboring prince: "But now behold (note the Book of Mormon style) the king causeth that his true city should go from his hand; let the king search in the tablets which are kept in the house of his father, and learn whether the one who rules Gubla has been his true servant."³⁰² Here as in Tyre the records were kept at the house of the ruling family; even in distant Rome in the time of Lehi the records from which the later annals were composed seem to have been preserved on tablets in the houses of the leading families.³⁰³ By that time the practice seems to have been universal around the Mediterranean. Where the record was one of real importance, plates of copper, bronze, or even more precious metal were used instead of the usual wooden, lead, or clay tablets. One of the most recent finds of this type from Palestine is "a copper or bronze plate" in Hebrew, dating from the twelfth century B.C.,³⁰⁴ containing a message "of entirely secular, profane character," but "which must have seemed important enough to be engraved on the dur-

able, though 'impractical,' material of metal."³⁰⁵ More precious documents, such as the famous treaty of 1278 between the kings of Egypt and the Hittites, were kept on silver plates, while the royal record of the deeds of Darius deserved nothing less than gold. The mysterious "reformed Egyptian" texts from Byblos are on bronze plates, and the Demotic Chronicle of Egypt was kept originally on plates. Significant in this regard is Idrisi's account (1226 A. D.) of the excavation of the tomb of Mycerinus, the builder of the great Third Pyramid. Idrisi reports that all that was found in the tomb was a blue sarcophagus containing "the decayed remains of a man, but no treasure, excepting some golden tablets, inscribed with characters of a language which nobody could understand." The tablets were used to pay the workmen, and the gold in each of them was worth about two hundred dollars.³⁰⁶ We leave the reader to speculate on what might have been written on those plates of gold which one of the greatest of Pharaohs apparently regarded as the greatest treasure with which he could be buried.

From an unexpected direction comes new and possibly significant light on written plates. Of recent years a considerable number of copper plates, inscribed, perforated, and linked together with metal rings, have turned up in India.³⁰⁷ Typical of these (except that they are narrower than most) are the Kesarbeda Plates:

"The set consists of three copper plates strung together on a copper ring . . . the circumference and diameter of the ring are about 7.4" and 2" respectively. . . . The plates measure roughly 7.5" in length and 1.5" in breadth each. The corners are rounded off. . . . The plates con-

tain to their proper right hand a hole having a diameter of 1/5" for the ring to pass through. . . . All plates are written on both sides."

The date of these plates is about 324 A.D. The contents, a charter of royalty stating the conditions under which the country shall be governed. Further east, but still within the sphere of Indian culture, inscribed plates of the same type, but which no one can read any more, are "handed down from father to son as ancient charms of supernatural origin,"³⁰⁸ showing that the tradition of the importance and significance of the plates survived after the knowledge of reading them had perished. Among the Karens such a plate, formed of "two kinds of plates welded together back to back," the one of copper and the other apparently of gold, was "the talisman by which the chief held his power over the people,"³⁰⁹ who thereby preserved in superstitious form the knowledge that the plate was actually a royal charter to begin with.

Now Hither India seems to be far removed indeed from the cultural world of Lehi, yet the fact is that the writing on all those plates actually came right from that world. It is now known that the script of India was derived from Aramic and Phoenician forms in turn derived from Egyptian. Since the oldest writing in India is that found on the plates, it is at least probable that they preserved not only the earliest script but also the form in which the prototype of that script reached India: The people who introduced the Semitic alphabet to India were people who kept their records on plates bound together with rings, a form preserved by the Indians themselves in their oldest and most sacred records. The case of the Karens is par-

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ticularly significant because those people have displayed such astonishing cultural affinities with the Jews that some observers have even claimed them to be of Jewish origin.³¹⁰ If that is so, their history must have paralleled Lehi's in more ways than one. Many chapters of the Diaspora remain to be written. At the very least the Indian plates bear witness to the importance of the linked-plate type document in ancient times.

valuable—far more “precious” than gold.³¹² The recently-discovered sword furnace at Gerar vindicates not only the Bible, which had long been thought to be in error on the matter of iron weapons, but the Book of Mormon as well.³¹³ The famous Damascus blades are of unknown antiquity; their steel, of fabulous quality, was always made of meteoric iron, according to Jacob—an indication of very ancient origin.³¹⁴ Even in modern

(*Metall von Himmelsfarbe*),³¹⁸ which may well have been steel. Ceremonial swords in very old Egyptian tomb painting are colored blue to represent either iron or steel, according to the same authority.³¹⁹ While the problem of the origin and age of iron and steel remains unsolved, every step in the last forty years has been in the direction of proving a much greater antiquity and much more widespread use of those metals than was formerly believed to be possible.

How Nephi disguised himself in the clothes of Laban and tricked Laban's servant into admitting him to the treasury is an authentic bit of oriental romance, and, we must repeat, of history as well, for such things did and do happen. During World War II just such melodramatic bluffing proved highly successful on innumerable occasions, effecting thousands of escapes from a watchful enemy.

When Zoram, Laban's servant, discovered that it was not his master with whom he had been discussing the top secret doings of the elders as they walked the outskirts of the city, he was seized with terror. In such a situation there was only one thing Nephi could possibly have done, both to spare Zoram and avoid giving alarm—and no westerner could have guessed what it was. Nephi, a powerful fellow, held the terrified Zoram in a vice-like grip long enough to swear a solemn oath, “as the Lord liveth, and as I live” (*Ibid.*, 4:32), that he would not harm him if he would listen. Zoram immediately relaxed, and Nephi swore another oath to him that he would be a free man if he would join the party:

Therefore if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us. (*Ibid.*, 1:34.)

We have already considered the correctness of the expressions “go down,” and “have place,” as well as the necessity of having Zoram address himself to no one but Nephi's father. What astonishes the non-Oriental reader here is the miraculous effect of Nephi's oath to Zoram: by speaking a few conventional words his fears were instantly and completely allayed,

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—Religious News Service Photo
Eastern tongue of the Red Sea, near Eziongeber, in the land of Edom.

Nephi was much impressed by Laban's sword:

the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and . . . the blade thereof was of the most precious steel. (I Nephi 4:9.)

Such ceremonial swords and daggers with hilts of finely worked gold have been common in the Near East throughout historic times. Many exemplars from Egypt and Babylonia repose in our museums,³¹¹ and the Arab princes still wear them as a badge of nobility.

“Precious steel” is an interesting term. Wainwright has pointed out that from the earliest times the Egyptians made swords of meteoric iron, which was of course very

Palestine swords and daggers have been “mostly of Damascus or Egyptian manufacture.”³¹⁵ The general question of steel in the ancient world is still unsettled. The Babylonians distinguished between *eru* (cf. our “ore”), meaning iron, lead, or copper, and “shining *eru*,” which meant copper or steel.³¹⁶ In Egypt a like distinction was made between ordinary iron, which was not only known but actually used for utensils as early as the Old Kingdom, and that type of iron known as *tehazet*, which some interpret as Asiatic iron.³¹⁷ Another type, *benipe*, is “iron from heaven,” i.e., either meteoric iron or, as Von Luschan believed, “sky-colored metal,”

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while on the other hand as soon as Zoram

made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth . . . our fears did cease concerning him. (*Ibid.*, 4:35, 37.)

The reaction of both parties makes sense when one realizes that the oath is the one thing that is most sacred and inviolable among the desert people: "Hardly will an Arab break his oath, even if his life be in jeopardy."³⁰² But not every oath will do: to be most binding and solemn an oath should be by the life of something, even if it be but a blade of grass; the only oath more awful than that by one's own life or (less common) "by the life of my head," is the *wa hayat Allah*, "by the life of God," or "as the Lord liveth," the Arab equivalent of the ancient Hebrew *hai Elohim*.³⁰³ Today it is glibly employed by the city riffraff, but anciently it was an awful thing, as it still is among the desert people: "I confirmed my answer in the Beduin wise," says Doughty. "By his life . . . he said, 'Well, swear by the life of Ullah!' . . . I answered and thus even the nomads use, in a greater occasion, but they say, *By the life of thee*, in a little matter."³⁰⁴ So we see the one and only way that Nephi could have pacified the struggling Zoram in an instant was by uttering the one oath that no man would dream of breaking, the most solemn of all oaths to the Semite: "as the Lord liveth, and as I live. . . ." (*Ibid.*, 4:32.)

THE END OF THE DESERT

In desert travel, the experts tell us, one day is depressingly like another, and Nephi's record is not meant to be a chronicle of everyday life in the wilderness; most of the information he imparts is incidental to some event he is describing. He does not fail, however, to make special note of the marvelous way in which the women seemed to thrive on the hard Bedouin way of life (*Ibid.*, 17:2), a thing that always impresses visitors among the Arabs.³⁰⁴ Nephi cannot conceal the excitement and surprise of these wonderful days that brought to a

close the long, weary years of monotonous toiling through the sands.

After traveling a vast distance in a south-southeasterly direction, the party struck off almost due east through the worst desert of all, where they "did wade through much affliction," to emerge in a state of almost complete exhaustion into a totally unexpected paradise by the sea. The route indicated would bring them to the sea either at the mountains of Oman or of the Hadramaut, preferably the latter. Of the Qara Mountains in this sector Thomas, one of the few Europeans who has ever seen them, writes:

What a glorious place! Mountains three thousand feet high basking above a tropical ocean, their seaward slopes velvety with waving jungle, their roofs fragrant with rolling yellow meadows, beyond which the mountains slope northwards to a red sandstone steppe. . . . Great was my delight when in 1928 I suddenly came upon it all from out of the arid wastes of the southern borderlands.

The "greatest living explorer" (as he has been called) goes on to describe the aromatic shrubs of the place, the wooded valleys, "the hazy rim of the distant sea lifted beyond the mountains rolling down to it," and the wondrous beauty of the "sylvan scenes" that opened to the view as he passed down through the lush forests to the sea.³⁰⁵

Compare this with Nephi's picture (*Ibid.*, 17:5-7):

And we did come to the land which we called Bountiful, because of its much fruit and also wild honey. . . .³⁰⁶ And we beheld the sea . . . and notwithstanding we had suffered many afflictions and much difficulty, yea, even so much that we cannot write them all, we were exceedingly rejoiced when we came to the seashore; and we called the place Bountiful, because of its much fruit. . . . And . . . the voice of the Lord came unto me, saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain. . . .

BOYS

By Isabelle D. Hanson

GOOD sent me boys;
No girls to help me sew
And make sweet cookies, don't you know;
But boys so full of life and fun,
Still bubbling o'er when day is done.
No girls to help me with the bed:
When tired—no cool hand on my head;
But boys to follow a guiding hand,
And preach the gospel in foreign land.
No daughter here in frilly lace,
No trace of powder on smooth face.
But if God wills in years to come,
My five sons will bring me some.

It is virtually the same scene: the mountains, the rich woodlands with timber for ships, the bountiful meadows for a paradise of bees,³⁰⁷ the view of the sea beyond, and above all the joyful relief at a sudden and unexpected deliverance from one of the worst deserts on earth. Much the same description would suit the mountains of Oman farther east,³⁰⁸ the discovery of which came as a great surprise in 1838. When Von Wrede gave a glowing description of the mountains of the Hadramaut in 1843, the great Von Humboldt and, following him, of course, the whole learned world, simply refused to believe him.³⁰⁹

(To be concluded)

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- ³⁰²Knudtson, *Die Amarna-Tafeln* 1, 372f (No. 74).
³⁰³Such was the theory of Niebuhr and K. W. Nitzsch. It is certain that family records were kept (*Livy. Hist.* VIII, 40, 4; IV, 16, 3), possibly as other records were on tablets or "boards," (*tabulae pinakes*) (*Dion. Halic. Hist.* 1, 74).
³⁰⁴Albright, in *BASOR* 73, 9f. calls it "a Hebrew letter of the twelfth century on a copper or bronze plate."
³⁰⁵Obermann, "An Early Phoenician Political Document," *Jnl. Bibl. Lit.* 58 (1939), pp. 229-231.
³⁰⁶The Idrisi passage is quoted at length by E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of the Dead, Papyrus of Ani* (N.Y., Putnam's, 1913) 1, 14, n. 5.
³⁰⁷G. Rhoads, "Kesarbada Copper Plate," *Jnl. of Bihar Research Society* XXXIV (1948), p. 32; pp. 34-35 lists beside the Kesarbada plates (1) the Mattapad plates of Damodaravarma 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", (2) the Kauteri plates of Vyayakandavarma 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", (3) the Peddavegi plates of Salankavana Naudivarma 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 2 $\frac{1}{10}$ ", (4) the Koroshanda copper plates of Vishkarvarma 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 2", (5) the Chikulla plates of Vikramendravarma 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", (6) the Komarti plates of Chandavarma 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " by 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " to 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". The plates with four lines of writing to a side are all royal grants and date after 350 A.D.; the others are earlier.
³⁰⁸A. Bunker, "On a Karen Inscription-Plate," *Jnl. Amer. Oriental Soc.* X (1872), 172-7.
³⁰⁹It was 6 $\frac{3}{16}$ by 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. "It is . . . of two different metals: the first half of the plate is dark copper, but the other half is a much lighter yellow, and I am not sure that it is not gold . . . it seemed too heavy for copper." Bunker, *op. cit.* p. 175.
³¹⁰E. B. Cross, "On the Karens," *Jnl. Am. Or. Soc.* IV (1854), p. 308. For many years the theory of Jewish origin was rejected as a matter of course, the school of "spontaneous generation" of cultural elements being supreme. Today, however, anthropologists are much more prone to attribute a common origin to things that present remarkable resemblances than formerly.
³¹¹Ed. Meyer, *G.d.A.* II, 205; R.M. Hyslop et al., in *PEFQ* 1942, p. 23 (Pl. vii, fig. 14); typical is an Assyrian bronze sword found in the hands of the Arabs in 1875: an inscription on the blade shows it to date from the 14th century B.C. (*Biblical Archaeological Society Transactions* IV (1875) p. 347f.) An iron ceremonial weapon found recently had a finely worked handle of copper and gold. T. H. Gaster, "On an Iron Axe from Ugarit," *PEFQ* 1943, p. 57f.
³¹²Wainwright, "Iron in Egypt," *Int. Egypt. Archaeol.* XVIII, 3f.
³¹³Caiger, Bible and Spade, p. 117; cf. art. "Iron in Israel," in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 1.2 (1938), p. 5f. Margoliouth, *Arabs and Israelites*, p. 72) reports an old tradition that "King David . . . was to cuirasses what Stradivarius is to violins." Cf. Jacob, *Alt Arab. Beduinenleben*, pp. 151-2.
³¹⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 151. In the last century "Syrian sword-sharpeners toiled across the desert from Damascus (to Meccah), carrying their large knife-grinding machines on their backs," Aug. Ralli, *Christians at Meccah* (London, Heinemann, 1909) p. 210. The "wandering iron-workers, the descendants of the primitive smiths, who went from place to place," have been met with by modern travelers in the desert. Petrie, in *PEFQ* 1890, p. 245 and may well go back to the ancient Canites, of very early times.

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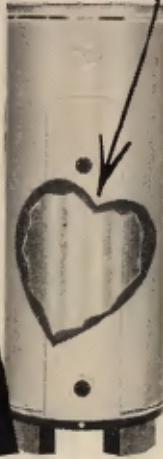
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¹⁰⁵P. Baldensperger, in *PEFQ* 1903, p. 168, noting that the same conditions apply in ancient times.

¹⁰⁶Fr. Lenormant, "Les Noms de l'Arain et du Culvre . . ." *Bibl. Arch. Soc. Trans.* V (1876), p. 344f.

¹⁰⁷F. von Luschan, "Eisentechnik in Afrika," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 41 (1909), Heft 1, pp. 47-49.

¹⁰⁸*Id.*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁹*Id.*, p. 49.

¹¹⁰W. Ewing, in *PEFQ* 1895, p. 172f. cf. A. Jaussen, "Judgments," *Rev. Biblique* XII, 299: "There is nothing stronger, and nothing more sacred than the oath among the nomads." This is true even of the city Arabs, if the oath be exacted under certain special conditions (*Surv. Westn. Palest.*, p. 327).

¹¹¹*Surv. of Westn. Palest. Spec. Papers*, p. 326; P. Baldensperger, *PEFQ* 1910, p. 261.

¹¹²*Arabia Deserta* II, 27.

¹¹³[Deleted]

¹¹⁴Burton, *op. cit.*, II, 94, 141f, has some picturesque observations on how desert life toughens the women. Doughty is no less impressed.

¹¹⁵Thomas, *Arabia Felix*, p. 48f.

¹¹⁶The large number of roots and derivative words in the Arabic vocabulary which refer to honey shows what a prominent place honey held in their economy. Thomas, of course, was not interested in finding honey, but for those who must live permanently in the desert, there is no greater treasure than a find of honey. Hence "the Arabs are curious in and fond of honey; Meccah alone affords eight or nine different varieties," according to Burton, *op. cit.*, II, 130, n. 1, who proceeds to discuss the various types.

¹¹⁷Hogarth, *Penetration of Arabia*, p. 137ff.

¹¹⁸*Id.*, pp. 148-150.

The Search

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IT was a month after my own wedding that Maida telegraphed me, "Francie, I'm married. He's wonderful. Coming home with him today. See you."

The telegram must have been delayed because just as soon as I had read it, a taxi drove up, and I saw Maida and a man inside. My day-maid went to the door.

I streaked up the stairs, hoping at least to get my face powdered before greeting them, but Maida couldn't wait. She dashed up after me. "Francie, Francie, I'm so happy. Hurry, I want you to meet him. Oh, don't bother with your face. It really won't matter. Come on."

She pulled me, protesting, down to the living room. Her husband was staring out the window, but when we came in, he turned toward us, his eyes homing first to Maida.

He came toward us clumsily, and his gaze focused with embarrassment just above my head. He was nice. He was true blue, but he was big, and fumbling, and shy. Why, I thought with an inward prickle, he

was a masculine Maida, that is, the Maida that used to be, the one we all laughed at in high school.

Maida slipped her arm through his and stood against him. "Claude," she said softly, "this is Francie, our friend."

There it was, I thought, all out in the open just as if it were a picture she was holding up for me to see. She hadn't changed after all. Not Maida. She only looked different. She was still full of the old wounds, the old slights we kids had thoughtlessly inflicted upon her. They were there, tender and hurting even though the outer surface was smooth and perfect. But it didn't matter now. Maida was safe with Claude, who would always understand. Why shouldn't he, when he could match her every heartbreak?

I knew now what she meant when she said that only she would know when she met the man perfect for her.

It seemed to me that they both stood in a misty radiance of their own as I leaned toward them, holding out my hands and wishing them every happiness.

New Light on the Great Apostasy

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Catholics, but few Protestants would deny that the early Church continued for a time with whatever gifts, graces, and authority it might have originally possessed. Actually, the Catholic concept of ecclesiastical authority has much more in common with Latter-day Saint views than does the Protestant concept.

Now let me proceed to clarify my analysis of the meaning of John's words.

1. The Apostle says "we know that it is the last hour," because his

audience had "heard that antichrist was coming" and "even now many antichrists have come." The Savior was, of course, one of those whose predictions were known to John's readers. When speaking to his Apostles concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the spiritual difficulties of those days, our Lord had said:

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

Behold, I have told you before.

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¹Matthew 24:23-25