



Type: Book Chapter

The Jews and the Caravan Trade

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Source: *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed.

Published: Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for
Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988

Page(s): 59–70



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5

The Jews and the Caravan Trade

Only within the last few years has it been realized that the ancient Hebrews were not the primitive agricultural people that scholars had always supposed they were, but among other things that they were always very active in trade and commerce. Their commercial contracts reached for many hundreds of miles in all directions, which meant an extensive caravan trade entailing constant dealings with the Arabs. In Lehi's day the Arabs had suddenly become very aggressive and were pushing Jewish merchants out of their favored positions in the deserts and towns of the north. To carry on large-scale mercantile activities with distant places, it was necessary for merchants to have certain personal and official connections in the cities in which they did business; here we mention the nature of such connections. Jewish merchants were very active in Arabia in Lehi's day, diligently spreading their religion wherever they went, and settling down not only as tradesmen in the towns but as permanent cultivators and colonizers in the open country. Lehi's activity in this regard is more or less typical, and closely resembles that of his predecessor Jonadab ben Rekhab.

The New View of Israel's Economy

In the preceding lesson we showed that Lehi, the representative man, was in all probability a merchant. Now we shall consider the claim more closely.

Lehi's day was peculiar as a period of great private fortunes: "The artists no longer work only for the court and the temples," the archaeologists report of this age, "they had now to fill orders for a wealthy bourgeoisie."¹ But one did not acquire "exceedingly great" riches by running a shop in Jerusalem or a farm in the suburbs. Almost a thousand years ago one of the greatest Arabic poets wrote:

Foreign travel replenishes the stores, and generates a

constant increase of prosperity, but . . . keeping close to home injures the faculties. And inevitably brings him who stays there into contempt.²

One of the surprising results of recent scholarship is the impressive picture of a vast and uniform system of trade and commerce flourishing over the whole ancient world from the very earliest times.³ The old conception of the oldest village communities as living under an economic system of *Hauswirtschaft* (independent local economy) in which trade and commerce were completely unknown⁴ has given way to the realization that the astonishing transmission of raw materials and finished goods from the Indus to the North Sea in prehistoric times was largely the work of caravans. True to form the familiar evolutionary interpretation of everything led scholars for generations to conjure up pictures of the first Israelites as primitive village peasants unacquainted with trade and commerce:

The impression has been generally conveyed [writes H. H. Gowen] that the Hebrews only passed from the agricultural to the commercial stage after the exile. . . . I found, on the contrary, a very considerable number of trade terms which are so natively Semitic as even to have passed from the Hebrew into Greek, Latin and other European languages. Even some of the terms which may originally have been Egyptian or Indian have apparently passed to the west through a Semitic channel and in a Semitic form.⁵

This is not surprising when one considers, with Eduard Meyer, that the records from the very beginning "show a highly developed industry in the ancient East," with the whole Syro-Arabian steppe and desert forming a single transmission area, feeding into the great cities of Syria and Phoenicia, which grew fabulously wealthy as centers of trade and manufacturing.⁶ "Already in the earliest period," writes Ebers, "we find the caravans of the Phoenicians and

Syrians conveying the commerce of the Egyptian and Assyrian World Empires along all the military roads, and making use of the Babylonian weights and measures.”⁷ There are not a few records of expeditions sent into the desert by the kings of Babylonia and Assyria in order to secure the trade routes used by their merchants.⁸ At the beginning of Israel’s history, the story of Joseph, as Ebers points out, shows the close tie-up between Arabic caravans and Egyptian markets.⁹ At that time to the north of Sidon the wealthy and sophisticated city of Ugarit “was a terminal of trade-routes via the Euphrates from Mesopotamia and from the metal-bearing regions of Anatolia (Turkey), and at the same time a bridgehead of Egypt and Mycenaean Greece in Asia.”¹⁰

With all their neighbors growing rich around them, “is there any reason,” Gowen asks, “to believe that the Hebrews were so different from other branches of the Semitic family that they were indifferent to commerce . . . and content to leave the monopoly to ‘Ishmaelites’ and ‘Canaanites’?” There is every indication that they were not. “From the earliest times the Hebrew carried within himself two opposite tendencies. . . . The story of Jacob so plainly reveals a man of immense commercial proclivity fighting desperately to retain his instinctive appreciation of the spiritual.”¹¹ Certainly Jacob’s sons knew something about business when they made a deal with Arab traders on their way to Egypt. “We must abandon once and for all,” says Bertholet, “the idea that Israel from the beginning kept strictly to itself,” and he proceeds to point out¹² that the Moabites exported wine by caravan in the days of Isaiah; that Abraham had dealings with the Qetura, who were Arab tribes engaged in the Ethiopian incense trade; that Israelites were acquainted with the markets of Tyre (Ezekiel 27:12; Genesis 43:11) and had their own merchants’ quarter in Damascus (1 Kings 20:34); that they were constantly being visited by foreign caravans;¹³ and that foreign merchants

and artisans enjoyed concessions and had their own settlements in Israel, where they formed regular commercial corporations.¹⁴ When the King of Damascus beat Israel's Omri, one of the concessions he demanded in the peace treaty was the right to set up a bazaar in Samaria. The story of the Queen of Sheba shows Israel's interest in the old South Arabia trade, while the ambitious expedition to Ophir went even further afield – perhaps even to the distant Zambesi country of Africa.¹⁵

Thus we see that the children of Israel, far from being an obscure and forgotten peasant community, as was so long believed of them, were doing business – and big business – in the desert long before Lehi's day and long after.

Overland Commerce

Jerusalem is an inland town, and hence all her trade, including that across the waters, had to move by caravan.

Almost every writer on the Holy Land has drawn attention to its character as a natural bridge connecting Egypt with the Empires of the Euphrates Valley. Two great highways of traffic passed through the land, the one along the coast . . . to Egypt, the other, east of Jordan . . . from Arabia to Damascus. Along these roads trade flowed uninterruptedly from the earliest times to the days of Islam and the inhabitants of Palestine were kept in touch with the products and markets of India and of Rome, of Libya and Arabia, of Egypt and Babylon, even of China and the Malay Peninsula.¹⁶

Of all types of commerce, Eduard Meyer concludes, that across the desert played a particularly important role, "to it men were beholden for the most precious and coveted of all nature's products, gold and incense. . . . On that trade rests the fact that in South Arabia among the Sabaeans about 1,000 years before Christ a high civilization was developed, which was in direct commercial contact with the states on the Mediterranean."¹⁷

The story of this South Arabic trade is one of the most important and intriguing chapters in economic history, and it directly concerns the Book of Mormon. For many centuries the richest trade route in the world was that which ran along the eastern shore of the Red Sea for almost the entire length of the Arabian peninsula.¹⁸ This is the route that Lehi took when he escaped from Jerusalem – and even his skeptical family seemed to think that he knew what he was doing. Not only the wealth of the Indies, but even the more fabulous wealth of Africa passed through the *suqs* of Saba (Sheba) to Europe and the Near East, and from very early times the Israelites were in on the trade. “Commercial relations with Yemen (the southwest corner of Arabia) begun in Biblical times were later strengthened by Jewish merchants residing in Babylonia and trading with Sabea and Abyssinia.”¹⁹ A succession of great Arab states controlled this trade and grew rich on it: “Minaeans, Sabaeans, Katabanians, Hadhramautians, and Himyarites succeeding one another to monopolistic control of lucrative trade-routes over which the riches of Asia and Africa flowed in to the eastern Mediterranean seaboard.”²⁰

There is strong philological evidence that the trade of South Arabia with Palestine and the Mediterranean was very old indeed.²¹ But in Lehi’s day something happened that virtually put an end to the lucrative land-transport between the two regions. Exactly what it was that caused the Arabic center of gravity to shift from the south to the north we do not know, though it is now maintained that it may have been the discovery of the monsoon winds, enabling shippers to by-pass the South Arabian ports. At any rate, the great Arab merchant states in the south gave way to the greatly reduced activities of the *mukarribs*, independent merchants who closely resembled the Greek traders in the west, with whom in fact, they entered into extensive negotiations through Sidon and Tyre.²² Along with this there took place in Lehi’s day a general shift of

business and population from South to North Arabia, where Jewish settlers and merchants lost the economic advantages which they had long enjoyed in those regions. As early as the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Ammon and Moab received a large influx of desert Arabs, who at the same time were moving into Gaza and the Negev.²³ In the fifth century all the latter region became Nabataean country, the Nabataeans being an Arab merchant state which by the end of the century had become a great empire, even participating in the struggles among the Greek cities for economic control of islands in the Mediterranean.²⁴ At the same time this kingdom was founded, the son of Lehi's contemporary, Nebuchadnezzar, founded Teima on the north edge of the Hedjaz as a royal residence, since he "obviously realized its great importance on the converging north- and south-Arabian trade-routes."²⁵

In the Old Testament "with abrupt suddenness the word Arab suddenly appears in the literature in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, never to vanish again."²⁶ Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it will be recalled, were contemporaries of Lehi. Even the enterprise and aggressiveness of the Phoenicians and Syrians which gained them economic control of the whole Mediterranean failed, Eduard Meyer observes, even to pose a serious threat to the Arabs' control of the caravan trade²⁷ — any great power that wanted to trade over the deserts had to buy their cooperation, and though the price was high, it was infinitely cheaper than the military conquest and occupation of an all but uninhabitable wilderness half the size of the United States.

World-wide Business Connections

The Jews had long learned the secrets of getting on with these people. Before the great "Arab push" of Lehi's day, they had their merchants' quarters carrying on business by special agreement in the important caravan cities.²⁸ The same system seems to have operated here as in the rest of

the ancient world. It takes two parties to carry on business, and the basic plan on which traders operated from the earliest times was what the Greeks called the *xenia*-contract, the Romans *hospitium*, and the Orientals *chuwa*. To do business in a foreign city, you depended on the support of a friend in that city, and in return gave him your friendship and support when he visited your city. Such contracts of friendship could be entered into either by individuals or groups and were inherited from father to son through many generations. They go back to the heroic ages at the dawn of history.²⁹ Inscriptions show the presence of a Syrian merchant colony in far-off Puteoli in Italy not long after Lehi, and a colony of merchants from Tyre flourishing on the Greek Island of Delos, calling itself "The Society of Tyrian Merchants and Shippers."³⁰ Such contracts of friendship were most indispensable in dealing with the touchy and dangerous desert people, where in fact the *chuwa* still survives as a hold-over from prehistoric times. Al-Hāriri gives us a glimpse of how it worked 900 years ago, when he writes of himself:

So that I never entered a city,
or ventured into a strange place,
without uniting [literally 'mixing'] with its governor,
as water mixes with wine,
and strengthening myself by his patronage,
as the body is strengthened by the soul.³¹

On entering a town, one would go straight to the house of the most important man who could give one aid and protection. Just so in the immemorial usage of the desert, one repaired directly to the tent of the sheikh of any tribe upon arriving in its area, to become his *dakhil* (protected guest) and ask for the protection and assistance which no noble chief could deny. It is still possible today, as it was centuries ago, for a town to enter into a fraternal covenant with a desert tribe, and for the payment of a yearly sum to enjoy

safe passage through its terrain and protection from other tribes as well; for such an agreement of *chuwa* with a great sheikh guarantees not only his support, but also that of the other desert chieftains with whom he has like contracts of brotherhood.³²

Since such agreements of friendship were reciprocal and were always associated with trade, it is plain enough (as the cases of Isaac and Jacob make clear) that the great lords of the desert were in business from the first.

Ḥārīrī describes how he was "once returning from Damascus, on my way to Bagdad, accompanied by travellers on camels, of the tribe of Nomir [i.e., they were Arabs], men distinguished alike by excellence and affluence."³³ "And [I] was," says a typical sheikh of the desert, "distinguished alike by opulence and munificence, who had estates and villages, and means of hospitality."³⁴ It may seem a contradiction to have a desert chief the owner of landed estates, and indeed, the discovery in the 1930s that Abraham did not always dwell in tents but may have owned a fine town house came as a surprise to students: "We had really learned something about him," says Sir Leonard Woolley, commenting on this, "which, as a matter of fact, the literature did not tell us and we should never have guessed."³⁵ The whole economy which we are describing has, in fact, come to light only with the studies of recent years, yet it is clearly if casually indicated in Nephi's account taken from his father's journal.

Jewish Merchants among the Arabs

Now there is a good deal of evidence that the Jewish merchants who sallied forth into the desert places and cities of Arabia exerted a very substantial pressure as missionaries on the local populations. Solomon's reputation stood very high in the land of Sheba in the extreme south of Arabia, and if "the last independent king of the Himyarite [South Arabic] Empire was an ardent convert to Judaism" he must

have been under some real Jewish influence.³⁶ Everywhere the Jewish merchants clung to their religion with great tenacity and often tried to press it on others, earning in the Roman world the epithet of proselytizing Jews. "The international contacts developed by the language of trade," writes Gowen, "afforded the Jew a marvellous opportunity for becoming the great missionary of monotheism."³⁷ Speaking specifically of the later Jewish merchants in Arabia, Wechter writes: "Though developing their own culture and social patterns they kept in close touch with Babylonian and Palestinian Jewries, but especially with the Tiberian center." And he quotes Herschberg: "The documents and sources testify that Arabian Jewry did not differ from that of all other lands. . . . They lived in accordance with accepted Jewish tradition."³⁸ The first thing a Hebrew merchant would do upon settling down in a place even for a limited stay was to set up an altar, exactly as Lehi did at his first important camp. "It is to be assumed without question that the settlement of Israelite merchants such as those at Damascus (1 Kings 20:34) had an altar that stood on Israelite earth (cf. 2 Kings 5:17). Without such it would have been impossible to live after the manner of Israel."³⁹

Jewish Colonies in the Desert

Even more significant from the Book of Mormon point of view than the individual merchant contacts with the Arabs are those Israelite colonies which from time to time went forth to settle in various parts of the wilderness. These were permanent colonies of farmers, as ardently Jewish as the merchants, "land cultivators who introduced into Arabia vine- and bee-culture, cultivated the palm and built dams to store the rainfall. They also distinguished themselves as craftsmen, especially as armorers and goldsmiths."⁴⁰ When we remember that Lehi's people went into the desert carrying "all manner of seeds of every kind . . . and also the seeds of fruit of every kind" (1 Nephi

8:1), in the confident expectation of settling down and planting those seeds, and that they too showed great interest in vine and bee culture and betrayed an almost sentimental love of fine workmanship in metals, especially weapons, it appears that Lehi was certainly thinking more in terms of the colonist than of the merchant when he left Jerusalem. However he may have acquired his great fortune, he left the city under a cloud—an outcast “driven . . . out of the land” with no hope or thought of returning (1 Nephi 7:14; 5:5; 17:43-44). His elder sons, who insisted on discounting any divine guidance, assumed as a matter of course that their father’s favorite, Nephi, “lies unto us . . . that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness; and after he has led us away, he has thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure” (1 Nephi 16:38). This to them seemed the natural explanation of what was going on: Nephi and his father Lehi, to them, were running a colonizing project. When Xenophon was leading the ten thousand out of Asia, some accused him, so he says, of planning to found a city, name it after himself, and lord it over the others.⁴¹ This was a common abuse of the colonizing technique. Equally common was the naming of the colony after the leader—a regular Book of Mormon practice, and perfectly familiar from Greek and Roman history and legend.

The Case of the Rekhabites

In the time of Jeremiah, or shortly before, a certain Jonadab ben Rechab had led a colony of permanent settlers from Jerusalem into the wilderness, where his descendants survived through all succeeding centuries as the strange and baffling nation of the Rekhabites.⁴² What makes them baffling is their Messianic religion, which is so much like primitive Christianity in many ways that it has led some scholars to argue that those people must have been of Christian origin, though the historical evidence for their great

antiquity is unquestionable. When one considers that Jonadab's project was almost contemporary (perhaps slightly prior) to Lehi's, that his name, ending in-*adab*, is of a type peculiar to the period and to the Book of Mormon, and that the Book of Mormon specifically states that the Lord had led other people out of Jerusalem beside Lehi, and that the Rekhabite teachings are strangely like those in the Book of Mormon, 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.

When the great Nabataean kingdom arose after the fall of Jerusalem, it absorbed among other people of the desert the Idumaeans, Arabic-speaking nomads who "though Jews by religion since the time of Hyrcanus, to a large extent continued to live like Arabs according to their former customs, and they undoubtedly served as a medium whereby the tribes of Arabia were brought into contact with the Hellenistic world over which the Jews were spread."⁴³ Certainly they show how extensively the tribes of Arabia had been brought into contact with the Jewish world and religion in the preceding centuries.

Questions

1. How has our idea of the economic picture of 600 B.C. changed in recent years?
2. How do these changes influence the interpretation of Lehi's activities?
3. What business activities did the Jews of Lehi's day engage in?
4. Why would Lehi be obliged to have dealings with the Arabs?
5. What connections did Jewish merchants have with the Arabs? How would this economic background condition the nature of Lehi's exploits?

6. What kind of business ties would Lehi have in cities outside Jerusalem?
7. What was the religious attitude of the Hebrew merchants towards the people among whom they traveled and lived?
8. Why did they build altars?
9. In what respects could Lehi's party be called typical Jewish colonizers?
10. How does the case of the Rekhabites support the plausibility of Nephi's story?