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Lesson 21 - Life in the Desert, Lehi the Poet — A Desert Idyll

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Abstract: One of the most revealing things about Lehi is the nature of his great eloquence. It must not be judged by modern or western standards, as people are prone to judge the Book of Mormon as literature. In this lesson we take the case of a bit of poetry recited extempore by Lehi to his two sons to illustrate certain peculiarities of the Oriental idiom and especially to serve as a test-case in which a number of very strange and exacting conditions are most rigorously observed in the Book of Mormon account. Those are the conditions under which ancient desert poetry was composed. Some things that appear at first glance to be most damning to the Book of Mormon, such as the famous passage in 2 Ne. 1:14 about no traveler returning from the grave, turn out on closer inspection to provide striking confirmation of its correctness.

Lesson 21

LIFE IN THE DESERT

Lehi the Poet—A Desert Idyll.

Prospectus of Lesson 21: One of the most revealing things about Lehi is the nature of his great eloquence. It must not be judged by modern or western standards, as people are prone to judge the Book of Mormon as literature. In this lesson we take the case of a bit of poetry recited extempore by Lehi to his two sons to illustrate certain peculiarities of the Oriental idiom and especially to serve as a test-case in which a number of very strange and exacting conditions are most rigorously observed in the Book of Mormon account. Those are the conditions under which ancient desert poetry was composed. Some things that appear at first glance to be most damning to the Book of Mormon, such as the famous passage in 2 Ne. 1:14 about no traveler returning from the grave, turn out on closer inspection to provide striking confirmation of its correctness.

An Eloquent Race: On one occasion Nephi returned to the tent of his father to find his brothers hotly disputing there “. . . concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them. . . .” (1 Ne. 15:1 ff.) Nephi, who had just before been conversing with the Lord, entered into the discussion, and “. . . did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, . . .” (1 Ne. 15:25), until finally “. . . they did humble themselves . . .” (1 Ne. 16:5), even against their nature. Wonderful is the power of speech among the desert people. Against the proud and touchy Bedouins, eloquence is the only weapon the sheikh possesses, and Lehi had it in great abundance. A good part of Nephi’s account is taken up with his powerful words, of which, we are told, only a tiny part are given. The true leader, says an ancient Arab poetess, “was not one to keep silent when the contest of words began.” When the men assemble in the chief’s tent to take counsel together, the leader “addresses the whole assembly in a succession of wise

counsels intermingled with opportune proverbs," exactly in the manner of Lehi with his endless parables.¹ "People of any other country hearing them speak," says our informant, "would simply suppose them filled with a supernatural gift." "Poetical exclamations . . . rose all round me," Burton recalls, "showing how deeply tinged with imagination becomes the language of the Arab under the influence of strong passion or religious enthusiasm . . ."²

Inspired Speech: The most notable thing about this type of eloquence is the nearness of poetry to inspiration. "With the destruction of the Temple," says one authority, "the magic power (of uttering oracles) was transferred to individuals—the so-called 'whispers,' pious men of faith."³ "Magic" is a modern verdict, but the ancient "whisperers," may well have been those by whom the words of God ". . . hiss forth . . .," (2 Ne. 29:2-3; Moro. 10:28). Since they no longer had the temple, which was soon to be destroyed, Lehi's people were obliged, as Alma later explains, to carry their own inspiration with them. In the migrations great and small, it was always the patriarch or leader of the group who was the peculiar recipient of revelation. Even the pagan legends of colonizers speak of divine signs and omens vouchsafed the leaders. Such men had wonderful powers of concentration. Conder recalls how during a wild and savage war dance in an Arab camp "the Sheikh of the tribe could be seen, a few yards off, engaged in prayer during the greater part of the time that this strange dance was going on. His attention appeared to be in no way distracted by the noise . . ."⁴ So might Lehi have prayed as his sons caroused in the ship. (1 Ne. 18:9 f.) There were two ways of delivering oracles among the ancient Semites, Haldar concludes in his study of the subject, 1) by technical oracle methods, and 2) by a priest in a state of ecstasy, but "no clear distinction can be made between the 'sacerdotal' and the 'prophetic' oracles."⁵ Confusion of types of revelation is also

the rule in the Book of Mormon, as when Lehi says, “. . . I have dreamed a dream or in other words, I have seen a vision. . . .” (1 Ne. 8:2) Which was it? It makes no difference, as long as the experience came from without by the Spirit of the Lord. As to the form the oracles took, all inspired utterance seems to have been given in stately formal language, while all true poetry was regarded as real inspiration. On such matters, Margoliouth reminds us, “We must suspend judgment because of the bewildering character of the evidence before us . . .”⁶ Everything seems to run into everything else. If there is nothing that might be called distinctively poetic in pre-Islamic literature it is because as Abu Taman observes, the entire literature *is* poetry.⁷

Literary Standards: In a way, the Arab is incapable of speaking prose, but we must not get the idea that his poetry is anything like our poetry. No Semitic verse can be made into anything remotely resembling good literature in English and still preserve a trace of its original form or content. Nicholson notes that the very best Oriental poetry contains “much that to modern taste is absolutely incongruous with poetic style. Their finest pictures . . . often appear uncouth or grotesque, because without an intimate knowledge of the land and the people it is impossible for us to see what the poet intended to convey, or to appreciate the truth and beauty of its expression.”⁸ “As long as our ignorance is so great,” writes T. E. Peet, “our attitude towards criticism of these ancient literatures must be one of extreme humility. . . . Put an Egyptian or Babylonian story before a layman, even in a good translation, he is at once in a strange land. The similes are pointless and even grotesque for him, the characters are strangers, the background, the allusions, instead of delighting, only mystify and annoy. He lays it aside in disgust.”⁹ How well this applies to certain “literary” critics of the Book of Mormon!

Lehi’s Qasidah: In Lehi’s day an inspired leader

had to be a poet, and there is in our opinion no more remarkable episode in the Book of Mormon than that recounting how he once addressed his wayward sons in verse.

It was just after the first camp had been pitched, with due care for the performance of the proper thanksgiving rites at the "altar of stones," that Lehi, being then free to survey the scene more at his leisure (for among the desert people it is the women who make and break camp, though the *sheikh* must officiate in the sacrifice), proceeded, as was his right, to name the river after his first-born and the valley after his second son. (1 Ne. 2:6-8, 14). The men examined the terrain in a place where they expected to spend some time, and discovered that the river "emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea," at a point "near the mouth thereof" not far above the Straits of Tiran. When Lehi beheld the view, perhaps from the side of Mt. Musafa or Mt. Mendisha, he turned to his two elder sons and recited his remarkable verses. Nephi seems to have been standing by, for he takes most careful note of the circumstance: "And when my father saw that the waters of the river emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea, he spake unto Laman, saying: O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness! And he also spake unto Lemuel: O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!" (1 Ne. 2:9-10.)

The common practice was for the inspired words of the leader to be taken down in writing immediately. When Abu Zaid returned by night from a wonderful experience, Hariri reports, "We called for ink and pens and wrote it at his dictation."¹⁰ Another time when a wise man feels inspiration upon him he calls, "Prepare thy inkhorn, and take thy implements to write . . ." ¹¹ So Lehi might have spoken to his sons.

The Oldest Oriental Poetry: On all the once controversial matters, certain aspects of the earliest desert

poetry are now well agreed on, though of course there is no agreement or proof as to just how old they might be.

First, there is the occasion. It was the sight of the river flowing into the gulf which inspired Lehi to address his sons. In a famous study, Goldziher pointed out that the earliest desert poems ever mentioned are "those *Quellenlieder* (songs composed to fresh water) which, according to the record of St. Nilus, the ancient Arabs used to intone after having refreshed and washed themselves in some fountain of running water discovered in the course of a long journeying."¹² Nilus' own account is a vivid picture of what Lehi's party went through:

The next day . . . after making their way as is usual in the desert by devious routes, wandering over the difficult terrain, forced to turn aside now this way, now that, circumventing mountains, stumbling over rough, broken ground through all but impenetrable passes, they beheld in the far distance a spot of green in the desert; and striving to reach the vegetation by which the oasis might provide a camp or even sustain a settlement for some of them as they conjectured, they turned their eyes towards it as a storm-tossed pilot views the harbor. Upon reaching it, they found that the spot did not disappoint their expectations, and that their wishful fantasies had not led them to false hopes. For the water was abundant, clean to the sight, and sweet to the taste, so that it was a question whether the eye or the mouth more rejoiced. Moreover, there was adequate forage for the animals; so they unloaded the camels and let them out to graze freely. For themselves, they could not let the water alone, drinking, splashing and bathing as if they could not revel in it enough. So they recited songs in its praise (the river's), and composed hymns to the spring. . . .¹³

The antiquity of this passage, or rather the author's first-hand knowledge of the desert people, has recently been seriously questioned, yet the language, though Greek, is strangely like that of the Arabs themselves, and certainly the main fact, the holiness of springs and the practice of conjuring by them, as Lehi does, is substantiated by the very ancient Babylonian formula: "I would have thee swear, by springs, valleys, mountains, rivers, must thou swear."¹⁴

Ibn Qutaiba, in a famous work on Arabic poetry,

quoted a great desert poet, Abu Sakhr, as saying that nothing on earth brings verses so readily to mind as the sight of running water and wild places.¹⁵ This applies not only to springs, of course, but to all running water. Thomas recounts how his Arabs upon reaching the Umm al-Hait hailed it with a song in praise of the "continuous and flowing rain," whose bounty filled the bed of the wady, "flowing along between sand and stream course. . . ." ¹⁶ Just so Lehi holds up as the most admirable of examples "this river, continually flowing . . ."; for to the people of the desert there is no more miraculous and lovely thing on earth than continually running water. When the Beni Hilal stopped at their first oasis, the beauty of it and the green vegetation reminded them again of the homeland they had left, "and they wept greatly remembering it." It was precisely because Laman and Lemuel were loud in lamenting the loss of their pleasant ". . . land of Jerusalem . . . and their precious things . . ." (1 Ne. 2:11), that their father was moved to address them on this particular occasion.

Two interesting and significant expressions are used in Nephi's account of his father's *qasidah* to Laman and Lemuel. The one is "the fountain of the Red Sea," and the other "this valley," firm and steadfast. Is the Red Sea a fountain? For the Arabs any water that does not dry up is a fountain. Where all streams and pools are seasonal, only springs are abiding—water that never runs away or rises and falls and can therefore only be a "fountain." This was certainly the concept of the Egyptians, from whom Lehi may have got it.¹⁷ Hariri describes a man whose income is secured and unfailing as being "like a well that has reached a fountain."¹⁸ Nicholson quotes one of the oldest Arab poets, who tells how the hero Dhu 'l-Qarnayn (who may be Alexander the Great) "Followed the Sun to view its setting when it sank into the sombre ocean *spring*."¹⁹

As to this valley, firm and steadfast, who, west of Suez, would ever think of such an image? We, of course, know all about everlasting hills and immovable

mountains, the moving of which is the best-known illustration of the infinite power of faith, but who ever heard of a steadfast valley? The Arabs to be sure. For them the valley, and not the mountain, is the symbol of permanence. It is not the mountain of refuge to which they flee, but the valley of refuge. The great depressions that run for hundreds of miles across the Arabian peninsula pass for the most part through plains devoid of mountains. It is in these ancient riverbeds alone that water, vegetation, and animal life are to be found when all else is desolation. They alone offer men and animals escape from their enemies and deliverance from death by hunger and thirst. The qualities of firmness and steadfastness, of reliable protection, refreshment, and sure refuge when all else fails, which other nations attribute naturally to mountains, the Arabs attribute to valleys.²⁰ So the ancient Zohair describes a party like Lehi's:

And when they went down to the water, blue and still in its depression, they laid down their walking-sticks like one who has reached a permanent resting place.²¹

In the most recent study on the *qasida*, Alfred Bloch distinguishes four types of verse in the earliest desert poetry: (1) the *ragaz*, or verses to accompany any rythmical repeated form of work or play, (2) verses for instruction or information, (3) elegies, specializing in sage reflections on the meaning of life, and (4) *Reise-lieder* or songs of travel, recited on a journey to make the experience more pleasant and edifying.²² Lehi's *qasida* meets all but the first of these specifications—and to be genuine it only needs to meet one of them. It also meets the requirements of the *saj'*, or original desert poetry, as Nicholson describes it: ". . . rhymed prose . . . which originally had a deeper, almost religious significance as the special form adopted by poets, soothsayers, and the like in their supernatural revelations and for conveying to the vulgar every kind of mysterious and esoteric lore."²³

Lehi's Qasidah: If the earliest desert poems were songs inspired by the fair sight of running water, no one today knows the *form* they took. But it can be conjectured from the earliest known form of Semitic verse that that form was the *saj'*, a short exhortation or injunction spoken with such solemnity and fervor as to fall into a sort of chant. Examples of this would be magical incantations, curses, and the formal pronouncements of teachers, priests, and judges.²⁴ From the earliest times the *saj'* was the form in which inspiration and revelation announced themselves.²⁴ Though the speaker of the *saj'* did not aim consciously at metrical form, his words were necessarily more than mere prose, and were received by their hearers as poetry. The *saj'* had the effect, we are told, of overawing the hearer completely, and was considered absolutely binding on the person to whom it was addressed, its aim being to compel action.²⁵

Lehi's words to his sons take just this form of short, solemn, rhythmical appeal. The fact that the speech to Laman exactly matches that to his brother shows that we have here such a formal utterance as the *saj'*. The proudest boast of the desert poet is, "I utter a verse and after it its brother," for the consummation of the poetic art was to have two verses perfectly parallel in form and content. Few ever achieved this, and Ibn Qutaiba observes that the usual verse is followed not by a "brother" but at best by a "cousin."²⁶ Yet Lehi seems to have carried it off. Of the moral fervor and didactic intent of his recitation there can be no doubt; the fact that Nephi recounts the episode in a record in which there is, as he says, only room for great essentials, shows what a deep impression it made upon him.

In addressing his sons in what looks like a little song, Lehi is doing just what Isaiah does (Isaiah 5:1-7) when he speaks to Israel in a *shirat dodi*, "a friendly chant," a popular song about a vine which, once the hearer's attention has been won, turns into a very serious moral tirade.²⁷ On another occasion, as we have noted, he employs the popular figure of the olive tree. The stock

opening line of the old desert poems is, "O my two beloved ones! (or friends)," an introduction which, says Ibn Qutaiba, should be avoided, "since only the ancients knew how to use it properly, uniting a gentle and natural manner with the grandiose and magnificent."²⁸ Lehi's poem is an example of what is meant: he addresses his two sons separately but each with the peculiar and typical Arabic vocative "O that thou. . .!" (*Ya laitaka*), and describes the river and valley in terms of unsurpassed brevity and simplicity and in the vague and sweeping manner of the real desert poets, of whom Burton says, "there is a dreaminess of idea and a haze thrown over the object, infinitely attractive, but indescribable."²⁹ Lehi's language is of this simple, noble, but hazy kind.

According to Richter, the best possible example of the primitive Arabic *qasid* (the name given to the oldest actual poetry of the desert) is furnished by those old poems in which one's beloved is compared to a land "in which abundant streams flow down . . . with rushing and swirling, so that the water overflows every evening and continually."³⁰ Here the "continually flowing" water is compared to the person addressed, as in Lehi's "song" to Laman. The original *qasid*, the same authority avers, was built around the beseeching (*werbenden*, hence the name *qasid*) motif, not necessarily erotic in origin, as was once thought, but dealing rather with praise of virtue in general (*Tugendlob*).³¹ Ibn Qutaiba (Sect. 12) even claims that the introductory love theme was merely a device to gain attention of male listeners and was not at all the real stuff of the poem. The standard pattern is a simple one: (a) the poet's attention is arrested some impressive natural phenomenon, usually running water; (b) this leads him to recite a few words in its praise, drawing it to the attention of a beloved companion of the way, and (c) making it an object lesson for the latter, who is urged to be like it. Burton gives a good example: at the sight of the Wady al-Akik the nomad poet is moved to exclaim,

O my friend, this is Akik, then stand by it,
 Endeavoring to be distracted by love, if not really a lover.

This seems to be some sort of love song, albeit a peculiar one, and some have claimed that all the old *qasidas* were such.³² But Burton and his Arabs know the real meaning, "the esoteric meaning of this couplet," as he calls it, which quite escapes the western reader and is to be interpreted:

Man! This is a lovely portion of God's creation:
Then stand by it, and here learn to love the perfections of
thy Supreme Friend.³³

Compare this with Lehi's appeal to Lemuel:

O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast,
And immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!

Note the remarkable parallel. In each case the poet, wandering in the desert with his friends, is moved by the sight of a pleasant valley, a large *wady* with water in it; he calls the attention of his beloved companion to the view, and appeals to him to learn a lesson from the valley and "stand by it," firm and unshakable in the love of the ways of the Lord. Let us briefly list the exacting conditions fulfilled by Nephi's account of his father's *qasidas* and demanded of the true and authentic desert poet of the earliest period:

(1) They are *Brunnen-* or *Quellenlieder*, as the Germans call them, that is, songs inspired by the sight of water gushing from a spring or running down a valley.

(2) They are addressed to one or (usually) two traveling companions.

(3) They praise the beauty and the excellence of the scene, calling it to the attention of the hearer as an object lesson.

(4) The hearer is urged to be like the thing he beholds.³⁴

(5) The poems are recited extempore on the spot and with great feeling.

(6) They are very short, each couplet being a complete poem in itself.³⁵

(7) One verse must be followed by its "brother," making a perfectly matched pair.

Here we have beyond any doubt all the elements of a situation of which no westerner in 1830 had the remotest conception. Lehi stands before us as something of a poet, as well as a great prophet and leader, and that is as it should be. "The poetic art of David," says Professor Montgomery, "has its complement in the early Arabic poets . . . some of whom themselves were kings. . . ."³⁶

Lehi and Shakespeare: No passage in the Book of Mormon has been more often singled out for attack than Lehi's description of himself as one ". . . whose limbs ye must soon lay down in the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return; . . ." (2 Ne. 1:14.) This passage has inspired scathing descriptions of the Book of Mormon as a mass of stolen quotations "from Shakespeare and other English poets."³⁷ Lehi does not quote Hamlet directly, to be sure, for he does not talk of "that undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveler returns," but simply speaks of "the cold and silent *grave*, from whence no traveler can return." In mentioning the grave, the eloquent old man cannot resist the inevitable "cold and silent" nor the equally inevitable tag about the traveler—a device that, with all respect to Shakespeare, Lehi's own contemporaries made constant use of. Long ago Friedrich Delitzsch wrote a classic work on ancient Oriental ideas about death and after life, and a fitting title of his book was *Das Land ohne Heimkehr*—"The Land of No Return."³⁸ In the story of Ishtar's descent to the underworld the lady goes to the *irsit la tari*, "the land of no return." She visits "the dark house from which no one ever comes out again," and travels along "the road on which there is no turning back."³⁹ A recent study of Sumerian and Akkadian names for the world of the dead lists prominently "the hole, the earth, the land of no return, the path of no turning back, the road whose course never

turns back, the distant land, etc."⁴⁰ A recently discovered fragment speaks of the grave as "the house of Irkallu, where those who have come to it are without return. . . . A place whose dead are cast in the dust, in the direction of darkness . . . (going) to the place where they who came to it are without return."⁴¹ This is a good deal closer to Lehi's language than Shakespeare is. The same sentiments are found in Egyptian literature, as in a popular song which tells how "the gods that were aforetime rest in their pyramids . . . None cometh again from thence that he may tell of their state . . . Lo none may take his goods with him, and none that hath gone may come again."⁴² A literary text reports: "The mockers say, 'The house of the inhabitants of the Land of the West is deep and dark; it has no door and no window . . . there the sun never rises but they lie forever in the dark.'"⁴³

Shakespeare should sue; but Lehi, a lover of poetic imagery and high-flown speech, can hardly be denied the luxury of speaking as he was supposed to speak. The ideas to which he here gives such familiar and conventional expression are actually *not* his own ideas about life after death—nor Nephi's nor Joseph Smith's, for that matter, but they are the ideas which any eloquent man of Lehi's day, with a sound literary education such as Lehi had, would be expected and required to use. And so the most popular and obvious charge of fraud against the Book of Mormon has backfired.

Questions

1. Why was eloquence a necessity for Lehi?
2. How does eastern eloquence differ from our own?
3. Discuss the relationship between inspiration, revelation, visions, dreams, prophecies, ecstasy, eloquence, poetry and scripture. Does the Book of Mormon make the same distinction between them that we do?
4. What are some of the peculiar characteristics of ancient desert poetry?
5. Can these be detected in Lehi's speeches?

6. Are we justified in calling his address to his two sons poetry?

7. Why is the average student or professor of literature unqualified to pass judgment on the Book of Mormon as literature?

8. How is the literary strangeness of the Book of Mormon an indication of authenticity?

9. What are the normal objections to calling the Red Sea a fountain? To calling a valley firm and steadfast?

10. What indications are there in the Book of Mormon that Lehi might have read and studied poetry?