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Lesson 18 - Life in the Desert, 1. Man versus Nature

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Abstract: In Nephi's description of his father's eight years of wandering in the desert we have an all but foolproof test for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. It can be shown from documents strewn down the centuries that the ways of the desert have not changed, and many first-hand documents have actually survived from Lehi's age and from the very regions in which he wandered. These inscriptions depict the same hardships and dangers as those described by Nephi, and the same reaction to them. A strong point for the Book of Mormon is the claim that Lehi's people survived only by "keeping to the more fertile parts of the wilderness," since that is actually the custom followed in those regions, though the fact has only been known to westerners for a short time. Nephi gives us a correct picture of hunting practices both as to weapons and methods used. Even the roughest aspects of desert life at its worst are faithfully and correctly depicted.

Lesson 18

LIFE IN THE DESERT

1. Man versus Nature

Prospectus of Lesson 18: In Nephi's description of his father's eight years of wandering in the desert we have an all but foolproof test for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. It can be shown from documents strewn down the centuries that the ways of the desert have not changed, and many first-hand documents have actually survived from Lehi's age and from the very regions in which he wandered. These inscriptions depict the same hardships and dangers as those described by Nephi, and the same reaction to them. A strong point for the Book of Mormon is the claim that Lehi's people survived only by "keeping to the more fertile parts of the wilderness," since that is actually the custom followed in those regions, though the fact has only been known to westerners for a short time. Nephi gives us a correct picture of hunting practices both as to weapons and methods used. Even the roughest aspects of desert life at its worst are faithfully and correctly depicted.

The Unchanging Ways of the Desert: The problem of survival in the deserts has two aspects—the challenge of nature and the challenge of man. It would be hard to say which was the more formidable danger of the two in the Arabian desert of Lehi's day or, so far as one can tell, of any day before or since. "The way of life of these desert tribes has changed but little through the millennia," writes Ebers. "The ancients already describe them as being robbers who also engage in trade."[1] The immense corpus of Arabic poetry which has survived and increased through the last thousand years depicts the same dangers and problems of life in the desert that confront the traveler today; a thousand years before the poets we find a vast number of inscriptions scratched in the rocks by travelers and now gathered into massive collections from all parts of the peninsula; many of these inscriptions go back to Lehi's day. Older than the inscriptions and the poets are the Babylonian and Egyptian accounts that tell us of the

same forbidding and dangerous wastes and of their equally forbidding and dangerous inhabitants. Egyptian texts four thousand years old speak with pity and contempt of the "poor Amu" who can never stop wandering in his terrible wild country.[2]

But before going into the Old World record, we shall, according to our plan, first present what the Book of Mormon has to say about the perils and hardships which nature put in the way of Lehi's party in the desert. (In the next lesson we shall consider the human obstacles.)

Hardship in the Desert: "We have wandered much in the wilderness," the daughters of Ishmael complained on their father's death, ". . . and we have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue; and after all these sufferings we must perish in the wilderness with hunger." (1 Ne. 16:35.) Lehi's sons confidently expected to perish in the wilderness and in despair their mother cried out to Lehi ". . . . we perish in the wilderness!" (1 Ne. 5:2.) On the last long stretch they ". . . did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; . . . and did live upon raw meat in the wilderness. . . ." (1 Ne. 17:1-2) From the first they ". . . suffered many afflictions and much difficulty, yea even so much that we cannot write them all. . . ." (1 Ne. 17:6) At times their sufferings and afflictions in the wilderness became so great that even Lehi began to murmur! (1 Ne. 16:20.) While in the best Arab fashion they kept to " . . . the more fertile parts of the wilderness. . . ." (1 Ne. 16:16), and thus kept their animals in motion, for themselves a good deal of the time there was only meat, for they got their food by ". . . slaying food by the way, with our bows and our arrows and our stones and our slings." (1 Ne. 16:15.) So dependent were they on hunting for food that when Nephi broke his fine steel bow, the wooden bows having " . . . lost their springs . . ." (1 Ne. 16:21), there was no food at all to be had and the party was in great danger of

starvation: " . . . being much fatigued, because of their journeying, they did suffer much for the want of food." (1 Ne. 16:19.) When Nephi finally returned from a mountain top with game, and " . . . they beheld that I had obtained food, how great was their joy! . . . " (1 Ne. 16:30-32.)

Along with hunger and thirst sheer exhaustion plays its part. The effort of travel entailed much fatigue, sufferings and afflictions, much difficulty and wading through much affliction. The difficulty of the terrain often made hard going, as we shall see in the account of Lehi's dreams, but behind everything one feels the desolation and exhaustion of a sun-cursed land. Where else would it be necessary for well-equipped and experienced travelers to suffer *thirst?* (1 Ne. 16:35.)

The Arabs Testify: Turning now to the corpus of inscriptions, we find an eloquent commentary to Nephi's text. An inscription of Lehi's own contemporary, Nebuchadnezzar, tells us, referring to the deserts between "the upper sea" and the "lower sea", i.e., North Arabia, of "steep paths, closed roads, where the step is confined. There was no place for food, difficult roads, thirsty roads have I passed through . . . "[3] "O Radu," says one old writing scratched by some Bedouin in the rocks of Lehi's desert, "help Shai' in a country exposed to the sun!"[4] Here Radu is a tribal deity, and Shai is the wanderer. Another writes: that "he journeyed with the camels in the years in which the heat of the sun was intense (?), and he longed for Saiyad his brother. So O Allat (a female deity) (grant) peace and coolness!"[5] "O Radu," another prays, "deliver us from adversity, and may we be saved!"[6] The word for "saved" *nakhi*, reminds us of what was said above of the feeling of dependence on God which the desert forces upon men. The constant feeling of being lost, and the realization that without help one can never be saved is a real as well as a "spiritual" one in the desert. "O Radu, deliver us from misfortune, that we may live!"[7] This inscription from

the Thamud country just east of Lehi's route, sounds like scripture—but there is nothing figurative about it. "O Allat," another traveler prays, "deliver 'Abit from burning thirst!"[8] "On a journey," Burckhardt tells us, "the Arabs talk but little; for . . . much talking excites thirst, and parches up the palat . . ."[9] No wonder they give the impression of being "a lonesome and solemn people!" "It is no exaggeration," writes a present-day authority, "to say that the Bedouin is in an almost permanent state of starvation."[10] "Many times between their waterings," Doughty reports, "there is not a single pint of water left in the greatest *sheikh's* tent."[11]

Rate of March: Lehi's party is described as moving through the desert for a few days (three or four, one would estimate) and then camping "for the space of a time." This is exactly the way the Arabs move. Caravan speeds run between two and one-quarter and three and nine-tenths miles an hour, thirty miles being, according to Cheesman, "a good average" for the day, and sixty miles being the absolute maximum."[12] "The usual estimate for a good day's march is reckoned by Arab writers at between twenty-eight and thirty miles; however, in special or favorable circumstances it may be nearly forty."[13] On the other hand, a day's slow journey "for an ass-nomad, moving much slower than camel-riders, is twenty miles."[14]

The number of days spent camping at any one place varies (as in the Book of Mormon) with circumstances. "From ten to twelve days is the average time a Bedouin encampment of ordinary size will remain on the same ground," according to Jennings Bramley, who, however, observes, "I have known them to stay in one spot for as long as five or six months."[15] The usual thing is to camp as long as possible in one place until "it is soiled by the beasts, and the multiplication of fleas becomes intolerable, and the surroundings afford no more pastureage, (then) the tents are pulled down and the men decamp."[16] "On the Syrian and Arabic plain," accord-

ing to Burckhardt "the Bedouins encamp in summer . . . near wells, where they remain often for a whole month."[17] Lehi's time schedule thus seems to be a fairly normal one, and the eight years he took to cross Arabia argue neither very fast nor very slow progress—the Beni Hilal took twenty-seven years to go a not much greater distance. After reaching the seashore Lehi's people simply camped there "for the space of many days," until a revelation again put them in motion.

The More Fertile Parts of the Wilderness: "The goal of the migration is always the watering place," we are told.[18] "Ranging from one spring to another," writes Conder, " . . . the nomads seem to resemble the Jews at the period when, for forty years, they lived in the wilderness."[19] The resemblance was not lost on Lehi's people. Speaking of the wells which Abraham dug, "and which had to be reopened by Isaac," Conder notes that they "were perhaps similar to the hufeiyir, or 'pits' which the Arabs now dig in the beds of the great valleys. . . . "[20] These were "the more fertile parts of the wilderness" of which Nephi speaks. "The wadis," writes Norman Lewis, " . . . actually simplify long distance travel. In the dry season they become natural roads of great length and in places are often several hundred yards wide. Their beds are firm and flat, and in them is to be found whatever moisture or vegetation exists in an arid country. For these reasons they are a boon to caravans, which often follow their courses for hundreds of miles."[21] Not long ago Professor Frankfort wrote of the south desert, "The secret of moving through this desolation has at all times been kept by the Bedouin. . . . "[22] Intrepid explorers of our own day have learned the secret, however, and Lehi knew of it too. Like a sudden flash of illumination comes the statement that Lehi by divine instruction " . . . led us in the more fertile parts of the wilderness." (1 Ne. 16:16.) Woolley and Lawrence describe such "more fertile parts" as "stretching over the flat floor of the plain in long lines like

hedges . . ."[23] They are the depressions of dried-up watercourses, sometimes hundreds of miles long. They furnish, according to Bertram Thomas, "the arteries of life in the steppe, the path of Bedouin movement, the habitat of animals by reason of the vegetation—scant though it is—which flourishes in their beds alone . . ."[24] In Arabia it is this practice of following "the more fertile parts of the wilderness" that alone makes it possible for both men and animals to survive. Cheesman designates as "touring" the practice followed by men and beasts of moving from place to place in the desert as spots of fertility shift with the seasons.[25]

Hunting on the Way: Mainzer has maintained that no ancient people were less given to hunting than the Jews.[26] If that is so, it is one more thing that sets Nephi off from "the Jews at Jerusalem," for he and his brothers, like the Arabs and the early Hebrews were great hunters. "My food is the chase, the earth my only bed . . ." is the boast of the true desert man.[27] As recently as Burckhardt's time ostriches were hunted quite near to Damascus and gazelles were "seen in considerable numbers all over the Syrian desert."[28] And there are still a few tribes, "the real men of the desert, who live by hunting gazelles, whose meat they dry and whose skin they wear. They have no flocks or camels, but travel as smiths, with asses as their beasts of burden. Even the Bedouins call them "the people of the desert, *'oma l-khala*, "dogs of the desert" or "people of the asses . . ." because they keep asses instead of camels. The early Egyptian tomb paintings show the people of the eastern deserts coming to Egypt always with asses instead of camels, yet on the other hand the Assyrian pictures show the desert people of Lehi's time as camel riders.[29] From the point of view of Nephi's story it makes little difference; in either case they would have hunted, sought the watering places, kept to the more fertile parts, and waded through much affliction!

Hunting Weapons: "Every Bedouin is a sportsman both from taste and necessity," writes one observer, who explains how in large families some of the young men are detailed to spend all their time hunting.[30] Nephi and his brothers took over the business of full-time hunters and in that office betray the desert tradition of the family, for Nephi had brought a fine steel bow from home with him, and he knew how to use it. He explicitly tells us that the hunting weapons he used were "bows, arrows, stones, and slings," (1 Ne. 16:15.) That is another evidence for the Book of Mormon, for Mainzer found that those were indeed the hunting weapons of the early Hebrews, who never used the classic hunting weapons of their neighbors, the sword, lance, javelin and club.[31] "The bow," he tells us, "was . . . usually made of hard, elastic wood, but quite often of *metal.* We do not know whether it resembled the Arabic or the strong Persian bow."[32] Evidence for metal bow he finds in 2 Sam. 22:35; Ps. 18:35; and Job 20:24. No need to argue, as we once did, in favor of a *partly* metal bow.[33]

Things looked dark when Nephi broke his fine steel bow, for the wooden bows of his brothers had ". . . lost their springs . . ." (1 Ne. 16:21, note the peculiarly Semitic use of the plural for a noun of quality), and though skilled in the art of hunting, they knew little enough about bow-making, which is a skill reserved to specialists even among primitives. Incidentally, archery experts say that a good bow will keep its spring for about one hundred thousand shots; from which one might calculate that the party at the time of the crisis had been traveling anything from one to three years. It was of course out of the question to make the familiar composite bow, and was something of a marvel when Nephi "did make out of wood a bow," (1 Ne. 16:23); for the hunter, the most conservative of men, would never dream of changing from a composite to a simple bow. Though it sounds simple enough when we read about it, it was almost as great a feat for Nephi to make

a bow as it was for him to build a ship, and he is justly proud of his achievement.

According to the ancient Arab writers, the only bow-wood obtainable in all Arabia was the *nab'* wood that grew only "amid the inaccessible and overhanging crags" of Mount Jasum and Mount Azd, which are situated in the very region where, if we follow the Book of Mormon, the broken bow incident occurred.[34] How many factors must be correctly conceived and correlated to make the apparently simple story of Nephi's bow ring true! The high mountain near the Red Sea at a considerable journey down the coast, the game on the peaks, hunting with bow and sling, the finding of bow-wood viewed as something of a miracle by the party—what are the chances of reproducing such a situation by mere guesswork?

Beasts of Prey: Nephi mentions in passing the carnivora of the desert, which were one of the standard terrors and dangers of the way to the lone traveler. His brothers, he says, " . . . sought to take away my life, that they might leave me in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts." (1 Ne. 7:16.) Whether he was to be left living or dead (and both practices were followed),[35] the danger would be the same, for in any case he would be left alone. Thus we read in the ancient inscriptions of the desert of one who "encamped at this water-place; then the lion wounded him . . ."[36] Another reports that he "came from perilous places in the year in which Ahlan was ripped!"[37] Others tell of having their animals attacked by lions.[38] Another tells how "there pursued him a wolf that continued a year to assault him from a hiding-place."[39] All these were lone victims, and it is being alone that Nephi says would expose him to the beasts.

There was once carried on in certain learned journals a lively discussion on whether the Hebrews raised bees or not.[40] Certain it is that they knew and treasured wild honey, even as Lehi did (1 Ne. 17:5), who "pre-

pared . . . honey in abundance" to take with him on his voyage across the ocean. (1 Ne. 18:5) It was wild honey, and there is no mention of his taking bees to the New World. Indeed bees and honey are never mentioned in the Book of Mormon as being in the New World at all.

Hunting in the mountains of Arabia to this day is carried out on foot and without hawks or dogs.[41] Nephi's discovery that the best hunting was only at " . . . the top of mountains . . ." (1 Ne. 16:30) agrees with later experience, for the oryx is "a shy animal that travels far and fast over steppe and desert in search of food but retires ever to the almost inaccessible sand-mountains for safety . . ."[42] In western Arabia the mountains are not sand but rock, and Burckhardt reports that "in these mountains between Medina and the sea, all the way northward (this is bound to include Lehi's area), mountain goats are met, and the leopards are not uncommon."[43] Julius Euting has left us vivid descriptions of the danger, excitement, and exhaustion that go with the hunting of the big game that abounds in these mountains, which are, by the way, very steep and rugged.[44]

Raw Meat: Nephi vividly remembers the eating of raw meat by his people in the desert and its salutary effect on the women, who "did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; . . ." (1 Ne. 17:2.) "Throughout the desert." writes Burckhardt "when a sheep or goat is killed, the persons present often eat the liver and kidney raw, adding to it a little salt. Some Arabs of Yemen are said to eat raw not only those parts, but likewise whole slices of flesh; thus resembling the Abyssinians and the Druses of Lebanon, who frequently indulge in raw meat, the latter to my own certain knowledge."[45] Nilus, writing fourteen centuries earlier, tells how the Bedouin of the Tih live on the flesh of wild animals, failing which "they slaughter a camel, one of their beasts of burden, and nourish themselves like animals from the raw meat," or

else scorch the flesh quickly in a small fire to soften it sufficiently not to have to gnaw it "like dogs."[46] Only too well does this state of things match the grim economy of Lehi: " . . . they did suffer much for want of food, . . ." (1 Ne. 16:19) ". . . we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness. . . ." (1 Ne. 17:2.)

The Desert Route: It is obvious that the party went down the eastern and not the western shore of the Red Sea (as some have suggested) from the fact that they changed their course and turned east at the nineteenth parallel of latitude, and " . . . did travel nearly eastward from that time forth . . . ," passing through the worst desert of all, where they ". . . did travel and wade through much affliction . . . ," and " . . . did live upon raw meat in the wilderness. . . ." (1 Ne. 17:1-2) Had the party journeyed on the west coast of the Red Sea, they would have had only water to the east of them at the 19th parallel and for hundreds of miles to come. But why the 19th parallel? Because Joseph Smith is reliably reported to have made an inspired statement to that effect.[47] He did not know, of course, and nobody knew until the 1930's, that only by taking a "nearly eastward" direction from that point could Lehi have reached the one place where he could find the rest and the materials necessary to prepare for his long sea voyage.

Of the Qara Mountains which lie in that limited sector of the coast of South Arabia which Lehi must have reached if he turned east at the 19th parallel, Bertram 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.[48]

As to the terrible southeastern desert, "The Empty

Quarter," which seems from Nephi's account to have been the most utter desolation of all, Burton could write as late as 1852:

> Of Rub'a al-Khali I have heard enough, from credible relators, to conclude that its horrid depths swarm with a large and half-starving population; that it abounds in Wadys, valleys, gullies and ravines, that the land is open to the adventurous traveler.[49]

The best western authority on Arabia was thus completely wrong about the whole nature of the great southeast quarter a generation after the Book of Mormon appeared, and it was not until 1930 that the world knew that the country in which Lehi's people were said to have suffered the most is actually the worst and most repelling desert on earth.

In Nephi's picture of the desert everything checks perfectly. There is not one single slip amid a wealth of detail, the more significant because it is so casually conveyed.

Questions

1. What evidence is there for the claim that conditions of life in the deserts of the Near East have remained virtually unchanged for thousands of years?
2. Why is this important in examining Nephi's narrative?
3. What are the natural obstacles to travel in the wilderness according to the Book of Mormon?
4. According to the ancient inscriptions? What is the nature of these inscriptions?
5. What is meant by "the more fertile parts of the wilderness"? Does the Book of Mormon refer to them in the correct context?
6. What were the hunting methods of Nephi and his brethren? What weapons did they use?
7. What is the significance of these weapons as evidence for the authenticity of the story?

8. What are the implications of eating raw meat? Can such things be?

9. What route did Lehi's people take through the desert?

10. What is the significance of the 19th parallel as evidence for the authenticity of Nephi's account? How does the story of the broken bow confirm the record?