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Abstract: *A traditional reading of Nephi's chronicle of the trek through Arabia relies heavily on two verses in 1 Nephi 17. In verse 4, Nephi states that they "did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness." In verse 5, he reports that "we did come to the land which we called Bountiful." The almost universal interpretation of these verses is that of sequential events: eight years traversing the arid desert of Western Arabia following which the Lehites entered the lush Bountiful for an unspecified time to build the ship. A question with the traditional reading is why a trip that could have taken eight months ostensibly took eight years. It may be that Nephi gave us that information. His "eight years" could be read as a general statement about one large context: the "wilderness" of all of Arabia. In other words, the "eight years in the wilderness" may have included both the time in the desert* and *the time in Bountiful. In this paper I examine the basis for such an alternative reading.*

Recent discoveries have provided remarkable plausibility for many of the Book of Mormon's locations and events.[1] As more discoveries are made, it becomes increasingly apparent that Nephi wrote his account of the family's trek through Arabia with a high level of accuracy and detail. However, in spite of Nephi's carefully composed text, a variety

1. Exemplary sources include the following books: Warren P. Aston and Michaela K. Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing, 2015); and George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New, Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003). Other relevant publications will be cited hereafter.

of questions remain. With an aim to seeking helpful clarifications, this article will explore three questions about the journey through Arabia:

1. What did Nephi mean by the word *wilderness*?
2. Why did the trek ostensibly take eight years, and why do all current speculations designed to account for those "missing" years fall short?
3. How much time did the Lehites spend in Bountiful, and how much of that total time was spent constructing Nephi's ship?

Nephi tells us that he wrote the Small Plate account of the trek through Arabia in First Nephi some 30 years after his departure from Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:27–31). Twenty years earlier, in what are usually referred to as the Large Plates,[2] Nephi had been similarly commanded to "make plates of ore that [he] might engraven upon them the record of [his] people" (1 Nephi 19:1). Note that Nephi's father, Lehi, had been recording events of their exodus even earlier than that (v. 1). All of that latter material was dictated by Joseph Smith and recorded on the 116 large manuscript pages that were later lost by Martin Harris. It was in those Large Plates that Nephi wrote or copied material that was essentially contemporaneous. In the Small Plates, written 30 years later, Nephi wrote retrospectively and selectively to emphasize spiritual points and only touch "lightly, concerning the history of this people" (Jacob 1:2). In some places, we are forced to guess at certain details of the trek. An example of a rather important detail concerns how long it took them to travel through the arid portion of western Arabia? Did it take eight full years? It sounds like it when we read in 1 Nephi 17: 4–5,

> And we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness.
>
> And we did come to the land which we called Bountiful …
>
> and we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum … etc.

A key question is what Nephi meant by *wilderness*. Another way to phrase this same question is where, exactly, did they spend those eight long years? The traditional and almost universal reading of these two verses assumes that the answers to these questions are obvious: They spent the eight years in the arid, desert portion of the journey: Jerusalem

2. They are not called "Large Plates" in the Book of Mormon.

to Nahom,[3] and on to the edge of Bountiful.[4] In other words, it assumes that there were two sequential events: (1) the Lehites spent eight years reaching Bountiful, and then, after that, (2) another undetermined period of time in Bountiful while building some kind of vessel to get them to the Promised Land. But is that traditional interpretation correct? The major and overriding problem with that reading is that the distances just don't match the timeframes given. If it was a journey of months;[5] how could it have taken them eight years? Jeff Lindsay puts it well when he writes that "as for the eight years in total, this is a puzzle for all of us."[6]

Yes, it is a puzzle, and in order to solve it, scholars have been obliged to speculate on how and where the Lehites spent the "missing years." Those various speculations all contain significant credibility problems. Ironically, none of them are even necessary if we allow for the alternative reading of Nephi's words, which I will present in this study. Those

3. Some scholars count the years beginning at Jerusalem; others begin at the Valley of Lemuel (which contradicts Nephi's account). Some end the years at Nahom; others end at Bountiful. But, since the question is whether *wilderness* was *pre*-Bountiful or *included* Bountiful, these nuances are irrelevant to this discussion.

4. There are only two serious candidates for the location of Bountiful. Khor Kharfot, as proposed by Warren Aston (Aston and Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi* and Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*), is most widely accepted, but nearby Khor Rori has been proposed by George Potter. See, for example, George D. Potter, "Khor Rori: A Maritime Resources-Based Candidate for Nephi's Harbor," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 51 (2022): 253–94, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/khor-rori-a-maritime-resources-based-candidate-for-nephis-harbor/. That article was then countered by Warren P. Aston, "Nephi's 'Bountiful:' Contrasting Both Candidates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 219–68, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-bountiful-contrasting-both-candidates/. It is not necessary here to take a stand.

5. Jeffrey Chadwick estimates that the time needed for the trek from Jerusalem to Nahom was "less than 18 months," and from the Valley of Lemuel to Nahom was around 13 months. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 74. Kent Brown similarly estimates that the journey from the Valley of Lemuel to Nahom "required only months" and gives as an illustration that "a Roman military force of 10,000 took six months" to go down and "only two months" to return and that "Lehi's party likewise took no longer than a year to reach Nahom." S. Kent Brown, "Refining the Spotlight on Lehi & Sariah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 45.

6. Jeff Lindsay, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Map: Part 1 of 2," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 179, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-and-the-amazing-technicolor-dream-map-part-1-of-2/.

speculations will be discussed later in the section called "Speeds and Stops Through Arabia."

An Alternative Reading of Nephi's *Wilderness*

Before addressing the three most common attempts to account for the missing years, let's first consider an alternative reading of what Nephi may have meant in 1 Nephi 17:4–5. The alternative reading that I suggest for Nephi's comment is that the word *wilderness* might not have referred only to a desert environment, but to any undeveloped area. If that is the case, then the eight years "in the wilderness" could have *included* the time spent in the lush but uninhabited oasis/inlet of Bountiful. That changes everything. Most importantly, it allows Nephi's eight years to represent the *total time* on the Arabian Peninsula, not just the time from Jerusalem to the entrance to Bountiful. This alternative reading of the verses requires considerable explanation, which I provide below.[7]

Considering the eight-year timeframe to include the entirety of the time in Arabia, not just the desert portion, is important in at least four ways:

1. It allows a reconsideration of the timeframes for the trek portion without having to speculate unlikely multi-year layovers to account for missing years.
2. It provides a closing "book-end" for the time the Lehites spent on the Arabian Peninsula. At this point, there is no clearly marked ending for their stay in Bountiful. It is one of the "blank checks" of the Book of Mormon that is left for readers to fill in — but nobody has known what number to write. The alternative reading allows a possible number: that of eight years for their time in Arabia, which includes Bountiful.

7. A similar interpretation was presented in the 2006 special issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. Jeffrey R. Chadwick wrote a response to three studies exploring the trek. All three adopted the traditional reading and speculated on how the Lehites spent the extra years. In just two sentences, Chadwick asserted that Nephi "considered Bountiful to be wilderness territory, its fruit and honey notwithstanding. Nephi's summary statement about eight years in the wilderness seems to me to include both the period of the trek (prior to [1 Nephi] 17:4) and the time at the seashore (after [1 Nephi] 17:4)" (see Chadwick, "Archeologist's View," 75). He did not offer any justifications for re-interpreting or ignoring Nephi's apparent assertion to the contrary. Perhaps because of the pervasive acceptance of the traditional reading, Chadwick's opinion has largely gone unnoticed. Hopefully, this article will re-present and fully justify his (and my) alternative reading.

3. It allows an improved estimate of the time available to construct Nephi's ship.
4. It increases the likelihood that a large enough percentage of the seeds, obtained in the land of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 18:24), would still be viable to "grow exceedingly … in abundance" in the New World (18:24). In other words, the seeds they carried were, in effect, an invisible clock ticking on their journey to the Promised Land. All seeds, like everything living, have a shelf-life. They progressively lose viability; that's the principle of entropy. Experts are divided as to how long seeds will last and still germinate but are united that the issue of seed longevity depends on the variety of the plants and the conditions of storage. Longevity is enhanced by very cool and dry storage and decreased by heat and humidity. The Lehites' situation could not have been worse. They experienced mainly hot, not cool, conditions in the desert and, later, very damp, not dry, conditions while in Bountiful and during the ocean crossing, especially during the tempest (18:13–15). Nephi's wording tells us that the crossing took at least five or six months, and most commentators suggest up to a year of sea-level voyage to sail across 16,000 miles of wet ocean. The traditional interpretation would require 13 to 14 years under these adverse conditions. Obviously, a greater percentage of the seeds would have survived the heat, then damp, of their journey if it took less time, eight or nine years, to complete. A question to ask yourself is where you would store extra seeds for multiple years: in the back of your cold fridge or next to the hot shower in the bathroom? For those who are interested, further discussion of this complicated topic of seed viability can be found in Appendix A.

A valid and obvious question is "How is an alternative reading even possible at all, given what appears to be Nephi's clear and specific wording?" The next section attempts to answer that question.

An Amplification or Colophon Rather Than a Sequence

Let's begin with a discussion of the larger context of the passage in 1 Nephi 17 which speaks of eight years in the wilderness. I will add the words "by the way" and "back to the story" to verse 4 (the reason will be shown shortly).

> 3. And thus we see that the commandments of God must be fulfilled. And if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them; wherefore, he did provide means for us while we did sojourn in the wilderness.
>
> 4. And [by the way] we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness.
>
> 5. And [back to the story] we did come to the land which we called Bountiful. …
>
> 6. And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum. …
>
> 7. And … we did pitch our tents by the seashore. …
>
> 8. And … the voice of the Lord came unto me saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain. …
>
> 9. And … the Lord spake unto me, saying: Thou shalt construct a ship. …
>
> 10. And … the Lord told me whither I should go to find ore, that I might make tools.
>
> 11. And … I, Nephi, did make a bellows. …

Essentially all commentators — from Nibley in the 1950s to Aston, Brown, and Potter in the present — write unequivocally and at length about the eight years being in the desert portion alone. For example, Aston and Aston write, "After some eight years … of difficult *desert travel* from their Jerusalem home … 'to the seashore' at Bountiful."[8] Then they talk additionally about building the ship. This, then, assumes a temporal sequence of two events/locales: the desert portion of the journey — ostensibly eight years — and the time spent in Bountiful — unknown, but generally taken to be another four years or so. In fact, the assumption of eight years, just in the desert portion, is so universally applied that many readers do not even recognize that an assumption is being made. This assumption fits the way modern readers read adventure accounts. But this is much more than an adventure story. One goal is to teach a doctrinal message of reliance on the Lord, trust in His goodness, commitment to yield our will to his, and a probationary period of agency

8. Aston and Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, 27. Similar quotes are in most scholarly publications.

and choice.[9] Although those encountering the Book of Mormon for the first time seldom realize it, 1 Nephi was written in a complex parallelistic and poetic style, as numerous scholars have shown but not all readers have noticed.[10] It is as if people are reading the verses with a *then* inserted:

> And we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness,
>
> And [*then*] we did come to the land which we called Bountiful
>
> …
>
> and we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, … etc.

However, just as *then* can be easily and unconsciously inserted, so the words *this includes* could also be inserted, instead. That would make the verses read quite differently and yield a very different conclusion:

> And we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness. …
>
> And [*this includes the following:*] we did come to the land which we called Bountiful …
>
> and we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, … etc.

Granted, this alternative reading is also speculative, though reasonable. An analogy may help. My wife and I have sons, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who live in Sacramento, California. We could recount a visit there by writing in real time using Nephi's formatting. It might sound something like this:

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9. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Nephite Metaphor of Life as a Probation: Rethinking Nephi's Portrayal of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023), 231–80.

10. For a discussion of Nephi's use of complex rhetorical structures, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Small Plates: A Rhetorical Analysis," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 122, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-small-plates-a-rhetorical-analysis/. See also: Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi's Dream, Nephi's Blueprint: How Nephi Uses the Vision of the Tree of Life as an Outline for 1 and 2 Nephi," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 231–78, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehis-dream-nephis-blueprint-how-nephi-uses-the-vision-of-the-tree-of-life-as-an-outline-for-1-and-2-nephi/. Another source is Benjamin L. McGuire, "Nephi: A Postmodernist Reading," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 12 (2014): 49–78, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephi-a-postmodernist-reading/.

> And we did sojourn for the space of many days, yea, even two weeks in Sacramento,
>
> And [*this includes the following:*] we did take a day-trip to the city called San Francisco, …
>
> And we beheld Alcatraz Island in the sea (along with other sights).

A sequential reading would not be correct. The two weeks in Sacramento were not followed (and then) by a trip to San Francisco on the way home. San Francisco was not on the way home. We enjoyed the two weeks with the family in Sacramento, which we then amplified or elaborated upon to say that the overall holiday *included* a day-trip to San Francisco along with other specific day-trips and fun events.

In like manner, assuming a chronological sequence of 1 Nephi 17:4 followed by vs. 5 may sound obvious, but this is not necessarily warranted. Although the *wilderness* and *Bountiful* are usually read as a sequence of two events, it is possible to read the time in Bountiful as an amplification of the statement of the total of eight years. In other words, the large context was the overall wilderness. The specifics were the time spent traversing the desert portion from Jerusalem to Bountiful and also the time spent in Bountiful.

This alternative reading of 1 Nephi 17:4–5 as an amplification is not an isolated linguistic event; it is a frequent device in the Book of Mormon. Nephi uses it repeatedly when he presents a broad context and then amplifies it, clarifies it, or elaborates on it. A small sampling of this literary practice can be seen in the Table 1. As the table shows, he uses this rhetorical device two times in the very first verse of the Book of Mormon. But he also uses this device throughout his account.[11]

11. Nephi was far from the only prophet to make large-context statements and then amplify the comments with specific examples. Examples of amplification by other prophets in the Book of Mormon are Mosiah 11–14, Alma 7:23–25, and Moroni 8:5–15. A few examples that span the length of the KJV Old Testament are Genesis 27:34–36; Joshua 24:15; Psalms 23; Isaiah 30:19–25; Isaiah 61:1–3; and Malachi 3:8 and 3:13–14.

Table 1. Nephi's Literary Practice.

1 Nephi Reference	Scriptural Broad Context	Amplification of the General Statement
1 Nephi 1:1	"I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents" (What is the result of this favorable birth into a righteous family?)	"I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father" "[I was] favored of the Lord in all my days" "[I] had a great knowledge of the goodness … of God"
1 Nephi 1:1, 3	"Therefore I make a record of my proceedings" (Tell us more about this record.)	"I make a record in the language of my father" "I make it with mine own hand" "I make it according to my knowledge"
1 Nephi 1:8–10	"And being thus overcome with the Spirit" (What exactly happened during the time that he was overcome?)	"He was carried away in a vision" "He saw the heavens open" "He thought he saw God sitting upon his throne" "He saw One descending and he also saw 12 others"
1 Nephi 1:17	"I…make an account of my proceedings in my days." (Tell us more about your account.)	"[It's] an abridgment of the record of my father" "[It is upon] plates which I have made "After … will I make an account of mine own life"
1 Nephi 2:4	"He departed into the wilderness" (What was a part of his rapid departure?)	"He left his house, and … inheritance" "[He left] his gold, and his silver, and his precious things" "[He] took nothing with him
1 Nephi 8:10–12	"I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (What do you mean by "desirable and happy?")	"It was most sweet, above all that I ever tasted" "It was white, to exceed all the whiteness" "It filled my soul with exceeding great joy" "It was desirable above all other fruit"
1 Nephi 17:1–2	"We did again take our journey in the wilderness; and we did travel nearly eastward from that time forth" (What happened there?)	"We did travel and wade through much affliction" "Our women did bear children" "We did live upon raw meat" "Our women did give plenty of suck" "[They] were strong, yea even like unto the men"

The last reference in Table 1 is perhaps the clearest example to replicate the situation of the verses in 1 Nephi 17:4–5. The location of the leg of the journey in 1 Nephi 17:1–2 is critical to keep in mind. Nephi can only be talking about the 700-mile leg from Nahom to Bountiful — skirting the southern edge of the *Rub' al Khali*, the sun-blistering sand

dunes of what is often called the *Empty Quarter*. That is the broad context. If a sequential assumption were applied to these verses, they would make little to no sense. The blessings that mitigated their challenges could not have *followed* the 700 miles. They all occurred *during* that leg of the trip. The descriptions of those blessings were all amplifications of the overall context of the journey from Nahom to the edge of Bountiful. It can be read in no other way.

In 1 Nephi 17:3 (shown above), Nephi presents a general principle: God will "provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them."[12] Nephi in the same verse applied this principle to their own specific case: "He did provide means for *us* while we did sojourn in the wilderness" (v. 3). The Lord is the Great Planner. Just as the earth was planned spiritually before it was created physically, the oasis of Bountiful was perfectly planned, prepared, fully stocked, and waiting for the arrival of the Lehites. The first verses of 1 Nephi 17:4–5 can thus be read as a further *amplification* of the general principle given in verse 3. The time in the lush and fertile Bountiful was also among those *means* provided. Nephi says as much when he adds in verse 5: "and all these things ['much fruit and also wild honey'] were *prepared of the Lord* that we might not perish." He continues listing the "means" in verses 6–13: an uninhabited oasis, ocean access, fresh water supply, flint for fire, ore to molten, trees for lumber, meat and fish to supplement the fruit and honey, his "light [to] prepare the way," and so on. The logical takeaway of the amplifications of the general principle is the conclusion that Bountiful was a part of the total eight-year wilderness experience. That eight-year experience plausibly included the totality of travelling from Jerusalem, building the ship, and launching out into the Indian Ocean for the beginning of the ninth year rather than merely referring to the desert portion of the trek.

There is another way of thinking about all of this that is related, although expressed differently. The passage in 1 Nephi 17:3–4 could be thought of as a mid-course, parenthetical aside about the trip in its

12. Nephi earlier taught: "The Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7). The Apostle Paul said much the same thing: "God … will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Joseph Smith was told: "Whom I love I also chasten … [and] with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance" (D&C 95:1). That general principle is true at all times and in all places — including Bountiful. It is, in fact, one of the prevailing themes of the entire Book of Mormon.

entirety. If the text were read with the parenthetical passage temporarily taken out, it would read as follows:

> And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness, our women … began to bear their journeyings without murmurings. … And we did come to the land which we called Bountiful, because of its much fruit and also wild honey; and all these things were prepared of the Lord that we might not perish.

The parenthetical passage, therefore, sounds as if Nephi, 30 years later, is interrupting the story to burst out in praise, song, and testimony to marvel that God always provides the means to accomplish what he has commanded, and that God specifically provided the necessary means for *them*. He adds that this went on for the entire eight years, not only during the desert portion but in Bountiful as well. He then returns to the factual account of the means in Bountiful.

This is not the only time Nephi uses such editorial asides, sometimes called *colophons*,[13] that interrupt a narrative account. For example, in 1 Nephi 1:14–15 Nephi starts to describe his father's reaction to the book he was given. He then interrupts the description to explain to the reader the limitations of his recording (vv. 16–17). He then resumes his account of Lehi's testifying of the truths he has just read (vv. 18–20). That is an editorial colophon; no one could read that text in any other way.

A smaller example starts in 1 Nephi 3:2, when Lehi tells Nephi of the Lord's commandment that the sons are to return to Jerusalem for the Brass Plates. He then interrupts the commandment to explain why the Brass Plates are important (v. 3), only to resume recounting the commandment for the sons to return to Jerusalem (v. 4).

There is a similar aside or colophon when Nephi discusses Lehi's rendition of the vision in 1 Nephi 8. Nephi then interrupts his father's account to tell the reader that he is leaving out some material "to be short in writing" (8:29–30), only to then resume Lehi's account in vv. 30–35. Nephi continues to quote Lehi and his exhortations to his sons for the remainder of chapter 8. Nephi then interrupts the account yet again with an explanation for the reader that there are two sets of plates. That comprises all of chapter 9. He then resumes the account of his father's

13. See "Why Did Book of Mormon Authors Use Colophons?," Book of Mormon Central, June 21, 2018, https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-did-book-of-mormon-authors-use-colophons.

preaching and prophesying in chapter 10. All of Chapter 9, then, can be viewed as an editorial colophon.

Another example of a colophon begins in 1 Nephi 17:9–11, where Nephi describes making a bellows to melt the ore in order to fabricate tools. He then "interrupts" that narrative to tell us that the Lord prohibited fire but made the meat sweet and was their light then and afterwards (vv. 12–15). Nephi then resumes his account of forging the tools, which he "did molten out of the rock" (v. 16).

Similarly, in 1 Nephi 18:6, Nephi talks about the party boarding the ship. He interrupts that to talk about the births of Jacob and Joseph (vs. 7) and then resumes the discussion of the launch into the ocean in verse 8.

Many other examples could be cited, not just of Nephi's use of editorial asides but other Book of Mormon writers' use of this literary device as well. For example, I have previously written about another significant colophon at the end of Alma 30. The story of Korihor appears to end with his being trampled to death in Antionum. The moral lesson is then given: "Thus we see … the devil will not support his children at the last day" (Alma 30:60). This colophon has traditionally been read as the end of the story. Alma 31 is then seen as the beginning of another unrelated story — but still in Antionum. In that paper, I attempted to demonstrate that this colophon was really an editorial aside that broke up a continuous and related account beginning in Alma 30 and *continuing* into Alma 31.[14]

In summary, 1 Nephi 17:4–5 can be reasonably understood as either an amplification or an editorial colophon during the narrative account of the Lehites' travel through the larger "wilderness" of the Arabian Peninsula — and that includes Bountiful. For this to be a viable possibility, though, it is necessary to closely examine the word *wilderness*. Could Bountiful credibly be referred to as *wilderness*? It must be for this new reading to be correct. I would ask the reader to indulge me in an extensive discussion of how diverse the concept of *wilderness* can be. It needs to be extensive, since I am attempting to provide an alternative reading to the one that is deeply imbedded in the minds of most readers of the Book of Mormon.

14. Godfrey J. Ellis, "The Rise and Fall of Korihor, a Zoramite: A New Look at the Failed Mission of an Agent of Zoram," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021): 49–94, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-korihor-a-zoramite-a-new-look-at-the-failed-mission-of-an-agent-of-zoram/.

Bountiful as a Part of the *Wilderness*

Granted, for the Hebrew slaves coming out of the fertile Egyptian delta, *wilderness* meant some form of desert. The word *wilderness*, used 305 times in the KJV Old Testament, is usually translated from the Hebrew *midbar* (מִדבָּר, Strong's H4057[15]). A *midbar* generally refers to an arid and largely uninhabited and undeveloped wasteland, usually with limited vegetation and a limited human population. Since the Hebrew people refer to *midbar* using that particular conceptualization of what it means to be an uninhabited wasteland, it should come as no surprise that a search of Hebrew Bible references for *midbar* finds an overwhelming association with a desert or an arid, dry land. Jeremiah 2:6 contains particularly powerful desert imagery: "The Lord led us through the *wilderness* (*midbar*), through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt. (Jeremiah 2:6).

That is the iconic Hebrew *midbar*. That Lehi's journey involved, in part, being led across just such an arid, dry land, even including skirting the southern sand-blown corner of the *Rub' al-Khali* or "Empty Quarter" is a given; nobody disputes that. But that a *wilderness* is necessarily restricted *only* to a desert is actually not a given.

A Diversity of Deserts and Mountains as *Wilderness*

The *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* does not restrict the word *midbar* to only a sand desert but offers considerable diversity.[16] The first *Brown-Driver-Briggs* definition is "tracts of land, used for the pasturage of flocks and herds." In addition to the stark desert he described just above, Jeremiah also refers to "the pleasant places of the wilderness." So, a *midbar* can contain "pleasant places" (Jeremiah 23:10; see also Psalms 65:13). The prophet Joel mentions "the pastures of the wilderness" in Joel 1:19–20 and even that "the pastures of the wilderness do spring [i.e., produce grass]" (Joel 2:22). In like manner, Nephi tells us that there were some relatively fertile sections along the wilderness of the ancient Frankincense Trail and again in the

15. F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (1906; repr., Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 2010), 184–85, s.v. "מִדבָּר," https://archive.org/details/browndriverbrigg0000brow/page/184/mode/2up. Also see the Brown-Driver-Briggs section at Blue Letter Bible, s.v. "Strong's H4057 — miḏbār," https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h4057/kjv/wlc/0-1.

16. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown–Driver–Briggs*, 184–85, s.v. "מִדבָּר."

Nahom region. Based on the research of Warren Aston,[17] Jeff Lindsay comments that "'the *most* fertile parts' [1 Nephi 16:14] come right after Shazer, followed by the '*more* fertile parts,' [v. 16] after which things become much more difficult and presumably a lot less fertile."[18] Yet all of this was still considered to be a part of the general *wilderness* or *midbar*.

A second *Brown-Driver-Briggs* definition is "uninhabited land."[19] Job refers to "the wilderness, wherein there is no man" (Job 38:26) but instead is a place for "wild asses … [where] the wilderness yieldeth food for them" (Job 24:5). Jeremiah talks of the "wild ass … [adapting to] the wilderness" (Jeremiah 2:24). Malachi calls it a "waste for the dragons [jackals] of the wilderness" (Malachi 1:3). Jeremiah longs for uninhabited seclusion in a solitary wilderness when he bemoans: "Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them!" (Jeremiah 9:2). Deuteronomy 32:10 describes "a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness." Lehi and his party passed through many such isolated patches between the infrequent oases. Note, however, that Bountiful itself was also apparently isolated and uninhabited. Aston writes, "It is evident, for several reasons, that Kharfot has been unpopulated for most of its history … [and there is] a likelihood to near certainty that it was uninhabited when the Lehites lived here."[20]

A third *Brown-Driver-Briggs* example of diversity in *midbar* is that it often refers to "large tracts of such land bearing various names, in certain districts of which there might be towns and cities."[21] A few examples among many include the wildernesses of Kedar (Isaiah 42:11), Shur (Exodus 15:22), Sinai (Exodus 19:1), Kadesh (Psalms 29:8), Judah (Judges 1:16), Beersheba (Genesis 21:14), Moab (Deuteronomy 2:8), and even the great Arabian desert (Judges 11:22).

There is considerable diversity, then, even among Hebrew speakers, in the application of the word *midbar*. Egypt was surrounded by desert, as was the Holy Land. In some places, that meant drifting sand dunes, yes; but in other places, that meant arid and parched country with scrub bushes and occasional small farms that required constant irrigation. That

17. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 48, 53.

18. Jeff Lindsay, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Map: Part 2 of 2," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 282, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-and-the-amazing-technicolor-dream-map-part-2-of-2/.

19. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown–Driver–Briggs*, 184–85, s.v. "מִדְבָּר."

20. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 143.

21. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown–Driver–Briggs*, 184–85, s.v. "מִדְבָּר."

doesn't mean that those more arid areas were always totally uninhabited — humans adapt to all sorts of environments — but if a desert area is developed, it is only with a great deal of work, effort, and expense.[22]

This diversity, even in the desert portions, is also shown in Nephi's own description. He refers to the Valley of Lemuel as *wilderness* four times: 1 Nephi 2:11, 3:4, 3:14, and 3:15. Yet he still writes that they left the wilderness of the Valley of Lemuel to cross the river Laman and "depart into the wilderness" (repeated in four verses in a row in 1 Nephi 16:9–12). He is clearly saying that the Lehites left one type of wilderness to enter another type of wilderness.

Mountains within desert areas have always been accepted as yet another type of *midbar*, even by Hebrew writers. Abraham went into the mountain "wilderness" (Jacob 4:5) to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2). King Saul chased David into a wooded mountain *midbar* in the wilderness" (1 Samuel 23:14–15). In Lehi's trek, the party skirted the Mazhafah mountains in the north, the Hijaz Mountains down much of the Frankincense Trail, and arrived at the Nahom (NHM) tribal territory "centered in the mountains northeast of Sana'a."[23] When Nephi broke and replaced his steel bow, the Liahona directed him "into the top of the mountain" (1 Nephi 16:30). Remember, too, that the oasis of Bountiful contained its own mountain (1 Nephi 17:7).

Lush Tropical Rainforests as *Wilderness*

The breadth of meaning of a *wilderness* — still in the Book of Mormon itself — can be expanded even further. Nephi wrote his account of their

22. As an example, consider the capital of Saudi Arabia, the same country Lehi traversed. Although Riyadh is now a large city, it sits on the northern edge of the Rub' al Khali and is almost surrounded by sand dunes (see the map in Figure 1). Access to potable water is at a crisis level. This vital resource is transported into Riyadh or drilled from aquifers. Were it not for these twin efforts, both at enormous expense, one expert warns that the "the lack of water could destroy [the Saudi state] if drastic solutions aren't found soon. Despite heroic means, the desert is still a desert." See Mohammed al-Harbi, "Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter: Beauty and Wealth of World's Largest Sand Desert," *Alarabiya News*, April 3, 2018, https://english.alarabiya.net/life-style/travel-and-tourism/2018/04/03/Saudi-empty-quarter. Also see Ruth Michaelson, "Oil Built Saudi Arabia — Will a Lack of Water Destroy It?," *The Guardian*, August 6, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/aug/06/oil-built-saudi-arabia-will-a-lack-of-water-destroy-it#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20oil%20may%20have%20built,a%20collection%20of%20towering%20skyscrapers.

23. Warren Aston, "A History of NaHoM" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 79. As a part of this article, Aston provides an impressive photograph of the Nihm mountains in Yemen, 78.

trek some 30 years after leaving Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:28). By then, he was established in the New World in an entirely different environment. He was now in the tropical rain forests surrounding the city of Nephi. Yet he continued to use the word *wilderness* (e.g., 2 Nephi 5:5). Clearly, the concept of *wilderness* had taken on an entirely different connotation. Nephi, his people, and his descendants were no longer just surviving in an arid desert or even enjoying an oasis-lagoon. Based on what many Latter-day Saint scholars believe is the most plausible general setting for the Book of Mormon, the Lehites were now living in a wilderness that consisted of the lush *jungle-like tropical rain forests* of Mesoamerica.[24]

Years later, Mosiah described some of his people being "lost in the wilderness for the space of many days" (Mosiah 8:8, 21:25). He tells of the army chasing Limhi's people, but they "could no longer follow their [Limhi's] tracks; therefore they [the army] were lost in the wilderness" (Mosiah 22:16). In fact, the army was "lost in the wilderness for many days" (Mosiah 23:30). Similarly, Mosiah's unsuccessful search party "wandered many days in the wilderness, even forty days did they wander" (Mosiah 7:1–4). Later, when king Noah sent his army to "destroy" Alma and his people who had "departed into the wilderness" (Mosiah 18:34), the army "searched in vain for the people of the Lord" (Mosiah 19:1). Notice that nobody died in all of this getting lost in the jungle rainforests, whereas, by contrast, "to lose one's way in the desert was almost certain death."[25] Moreover, when Zeniff was later forced to defend his people, he armed the men but "caused that the women and children of my people should *be hid* in the wilderness" (Mosiah 10:9). Hiding in a desert is difficult; hiding in a tropical rainforest is easy, almost unavoidable. Even pyramids and stone buildings become lost in vegetation. For example, one recent survey along the borders of Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, using LIDAR aerial photography, revealed over 61,000 structures that are not easily visible from the ground because of the jungle growth.[26]

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24. I acknowledge that many faithful members of the Church adopt the Heartland Theory — i.e., that the Book of Mormon events occurred in the area south of the Great Lakes. Even using that theory, Nephi's people would be living in a heavily forested area, not in a desert.

25. John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1965), s.v. "desert."

26. Brian Hales quotes Takeshi Inomata, et al., "Archaeological Application of Airborne LiDAR with Object-Based Vegetation Classification and Visualization Techniques at the Lowland Maya Site of Ceibal, Guatemala," *Remote Sensing* 9 (2017): 563, https://www.mdpi.com/2072-4292/9/6/563. See Brian C. Hales,

One might object that these accounts in Mosiah occurred 400 years after Nephi and are therefore not relevant to an Ancient Near East (ANE) understanding of the word. This is irrelevant, since at this point, we are not talking about the ANE, we are talking about Nephi's account, which, while beginning in the ANE, soon spread to the tropical rainforests of the Americas. Although we know that the Nephite language changed over time, the translation into the word *wilderness* was given to Joseph Smith by the Lord. It is not reasonable to expect that the textual meaning of a word that was familiar to, and used by, Joseph Smith changed, without warning, sometime between the ANE beginning of 1 Nephi and the New World account of Mosiah.

Plains, Forests, Oceans, and Ice Fields as *Wilderness*

A more modern diversity of meaning is also shown in the etymology of the English word *wilderness*: "Wilderness (n.) 'wild, uninhabited, or uncultivated place,' with -ness + Old English *wild-deor* 'wild animal, wild deer.'"[27] A "wilderness," then, is a relatively uninhabited area, but not necessarily an arid or a sandy one. It is instructive to look at what Noah Webster considered a *wilderness* in 1828, at the time of Joseph Smith. He started his definition with "a *desert*" but quickly moved beyond that. Similar to the *Brown-Driver-Briggs* definition given earlier, Webster referred to "a tract of land or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings." Examples of that were "a forest or a wide barren plain."[28] His second definition was "the ocean." Let's touch on these other meanings of a *wilderness*.

One major definition of *wilderness* in the minds of Americans in 1828, presumably including Joseph Smith, included the Great Plains of the Midwest and the deciduous forests of the East. Joseph Smith used the word *wilderness* over 200 times in the Book of Mormon and 16 times in

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"Unavailable Genetic Evidence, Multiple Simultaneous Promised Lands, and Lamanites by Location? Possible Ramifications of the Book of Mormon Limited Geography Theory," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 56 (2023): 114–15, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/unavailable-genetic-evidence-multiple-simultaneous-promised-lands-and-lamanites-by-location-possible-ramifications-of-the-book-of-mormon-limited-geography-theory/. See also "Sprawling Maya network discovered under Guatemala Jungle," *BBC News*, February 2, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-42916261.

27. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "wilderness," https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=wilderness.

28. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the American Language* (1828), s.v. "wilderness," https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Wilderness.

the Doctrine and Covenants, often to describe the deciduous forests near his home. One entry reads, "My servant Parley P. Pratt … shall go … into the *wilderness* among the Lamanites" (D&C 32:1–2). Another asks, "And again, what do we hear? … A voice of the Lord in the *wilderness* of Fayette, Seneca county. … The voice of Peter, James, and John in the *wilderness* … [by] the Susquehanna river" (D&C 128:20).

As the West was explored and developed, readers were told of vast evergreen forests on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Joseph Smith only saw those forests in vision but had expected to lead the Saints through the wilderness plains to those wilderness evergreen forests.[29] He was, of course, forced to leave that exodus to Brigham Young, but the West as *wilderness* still resides in the minds of millions of Americans.[30]

As noted earlier, Noah Webster's 1828 definitions expanded the diversity even further to include "the ocean."[31] Even though Nephi did not use the word *wilderness* in his description of the ocean leg of the journey, to the weary travelers that would have seemed an empty wilderness. The Lehites became all too familiar with that wilderness, given their likely year-long crossing."[32] So, if *wilderness* can be expanded to include uninhabited and undeveloped prairies, forests, and oceans, there seems no reason the *midbar* cannot be expanded to include the lagoon of Bountiful.

In an even further and more dramatic contrast to the Hebrew mindsets of deserts and mountains is the mindset of many people of the far north. They have always thought, and continue to think, of their vast,

29. See "Joseph Smith's Rocky Mountain Prophecy," *FAIR Answers Wiki*, https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Joseph_Smith%27s_Rocky_Mountain_prophecy.

30. Gundars Rudzitis writes, "To me, the American West is wilderness, yet wilderness and the wild mean different things to different people" (Gundars Rudzitis, Wilderness and the Changing American West [New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966], xi and 10). There is now a "long tradition of wealthy elites" remaking the wilderness of the American West by purchasing great swaths of land in an attempt to preserve this wilderness, at least for themselves (Justin Farrell, *Billionaire Wilderness* [Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 2020], 150–51.)

31. Webster, *Dictionary*, s.v. "wilderness."

32. Jason Daley noted that "anyone who's ventured beyond the sight of land or looked down from a jetliner could easily imagine most of the vast ocean as a wilderness." He adds, "The Wilderness Conservation Society … develop[ed] a map of … the world's oceans [that] fit their definition of wilderness." Jason Daley, "Why the Ocean Needs Wilderness," *Smithsonian Magazine* (website), August 6, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-ocean-needs-wilderness-180969875.

undeveloped regions of ice and snow as *wilderness*.[33] The U.S. National Park Service officially calls Alaska a "wilderness,"[34] and that word also applies to the southern continent, where "as much as 99.6% of Antarctica is considered to be *wilderness*."[35]

The definition of a w*ilderness* therefore — whether ancient or modern — often comes down to the mindset of the speaker. That's why a mountain, a plain, a forest, an ocean, and even a frozen tundra could all be a *wilderness*. The definition is in the eye of the beholder. People envision the concept of an undeveloped area according to what is in their mental map. If these varying definitions of an undeveloped wilderness are all valid, and they seem to be, and if the fertile oases of Western Arabia are universally acceptable as part of the greater wilderness through which the Lehites traveled, then there seems to be no reason that *midbar* could not be expanded to include the uninhabited and undeveloped oasis of Bountiful.

There is no question that the fertility of the lagoon came as a total surprise to the Lehites. The beauty and fertility inspired them to spontaneously name the inlet *Bountiful*. Although the lagoon came across as *bountiful* in comparison to the Empty Quarter that they just spent an agonizing month or two traversing, Bountiful was as "wild" (uninhabited and uncultivated) in its own way as the arid land along the west coast of Arabia had been. It was a mini and fertile "wilderness" within a larger and dryer "wilderness." In a fascinating parallel written not long after the death of Joseph Smith, William Palgrave, an 1860–65 traveler, found his own lush inlets in Oman (though along the northern coast of Oman, not in the Dhofar area).

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33. Rovaniemi, Finland, advertises their various winter destinations as being in the "wilderness," https://wildnordic.fi/?s=%22wilderness%22; as does Norway's "Arctic Wilderness Lodge," *Best Served Scandinavia* (website), www.best-served.co.uk/destinations/norway/places-to-stay/arctic-wilderness-lodge-norway-183930.

34. The United States Congress designates as protected a 7.2-million-acre area in Alaska, calling it the "Gates of the Arctic Wilderness" (University of Montana, "Gates of the Arctic Wilderness," *Wilderness Connect*, https://wilderness.net/visit-wilderness/?ID=199). The U.S. National Park Service describes that area as a "Premier Wilderness" and "Alaska's Ultimate Wilderness" (U.S. Department of the Interior, "Arctic Wilderness," August 15, 2019, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/arctic/wilderness.htm).

35. Nick Carne, "How Much of Antarctica is Really Wilderness? New Study Maps Extent and Pattern of Human Activity," *Cosmos Weekly*, July 17, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20200717113628/https://cosmosmagazine.com/earth/earth-sciences/how-much-of-antarctica-is-really-wilderness/.

> [W]e anchored … [off] the coast. … Next morning dawned for us on a very pretty scene. It was a low shingly beach, behind which a wooded valley stretched far back between the mountains, and ended in deep gorges, also clothed with trees, though the rough granite crags peeped out here and there. … [There] were herds of goats clinging to the mountain ledges … and *abundant* [bountiful?] vegetation of mixed character … laden with round berries … [all] contrasted pleasantly with the past barrenness.[36]

Nephi's Own Hints of Bountiful as a *Wilderness*

An obvious question that follows this discussion of the diversity of *wilderness* is whether Nephi himself ever used the term to refer to the oasis of Bountiful. Would that not be the acid test? Obviously, we would not expect to find Nephi frequently using the word *wilderness* to refer to Bountiful, since that might well have been contrary to his youthful mindset of a *midbar*. That may be the reason why only twice may Nephi's words associate Bountiful with *wilderness*. The first instance occurs as the family is loading up the ship: "After we had prepared all things, much *fruits* and *meat from the wilderness*, and *honey* in abundance, and provisions according to that which the Lord had commanded us, we did go down into the ship" (1 Nephi 18:6).

One must consider several questions with this possible link of Bountiful and *wilderness*.

- Why did Nephi place the word *meat* between the words *fruit and honey*? He didn't say, "fruit and honey from Bountiful and meat from the wilderness." The placement of the words suggests that all three categories of food came from the same place: "from the wilderness" of Bountiful.
- What is meant by "meat from the wilderness"? Surely not the desert of the Rub' al-Khali, which was many days of travel back up the rock-strewn wadi. Nor is it likely that they simply hopped across the high cliffs and mountains to the north. Going to the desert was, by no means, a case of merely stepping out of a garden oasis to get meat and then stepping back into the lagoon. Could the game animals have been as close as the *mountain* in which Nephi

36. William G. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia* (London: Macmillan, 1865), 2:323–24.

prayed? Since that mountain was unquestionably a part of *Bountiful*, that would suggest that Bountiful was part of the wilderness.

- Why would the game be out in the desert in the first place? There was little food for them there and little water. An axiom is that animals follow water, and abundant fresh water was in the lagoon. In any case, it is well documented that wildlife, both kosher and non-kosher, was bountiful in Bountiful, as Aston convincingly documents.[37] They did not need to leave the region of Bountiful to find game.

The second instance of Nephi's wording possibly associating Bountiful with *wilderness* comes not from what Nephi says, but from what he does *not* say. It occurs in 2 Nephi just after Lehi died. The full weight of the responsibility for the new immigrants' physical and spiritual well-being had come crashing down on the head of Nephi, who was, after all, still just a young man. In a lament of great intimacy, often called *Nephi's Psalm*, he contemplates his own perceived weaknesses. Then he recounts, in a poetic parallelistic couplet that seems to pair "led in wilderness" and "preserved upon waters," that "My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep. (2 Nephi 4:20).

What wildernesses is he referring to? There is no disputing that Nephi experienced afflictions in the desert portion *preceding* his entering the land of Bountiful. And Nephi obviously included afflictions *following* Bountiful while crossing the wilderness of the "waters of the great deep."

37. There were animals in both Khor Rori and Khor Kharfot. Aston's boots-on-the-ground video, "Lehi in Arabia," shows a close-up of a predator (likely an Arabian leopard) in Khor Kharfot with eyes glowing in the night. The narrator tells the viewer that "Kharfot is a sanctuary for wildlife" and discusses a "diversity of wildlife; it was not uncommon for the team to wake up with a fresh leopard kill nearby or find new turtle and wolf tracks on the beach." See "Lehi in Arabia: The Search for Nephi's Bountiful," *Living Scriptures Streaming*, December 15, 2015, timestamp 5, https://stream.livingscriptures.com/movies/lehi-in-arabia. Warren and Michaela Aston also recount an anecdotal incident in which "one whole meal disappeared when a cow loomed out of the darkness and it was devoured as it cooked on the fire." Aston and Aston, "In the Footsteps of Lehi," 67–68. Aston summarized the situation when he writes in his larger book: "A handful of the almost extinct Arabian Leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*), together with wolves, porcupines, rock hyrax and striped hyenas still live here and there is a variety of other small game and over 100 bird species, some of them potential food sources." Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 135.

But why does he appear to be skipping his afflictions *within* Bountiful? That he also experienced afflictions while in the inlet is beyond question. They included the onerous and overwhelming responsibility of building a seaworthy ship out of tree trunks, while being roundly mocked and ridiculed (1 Nephi 17:17), and even suffering an attempted murder (1 Nephi 17:48). It would be highly unlikely for him to describe afflictions in the desert and then skip several years, only to then describe afflictions on the ocean and thereby glossing over his afflictions in Bountiful. Instead, it suggests that he considered all of his afflictions, including those in Bountiful, to be a part of the total "afflictions in the wilderness."

New World References to Bountiful as a *Wilderness*

So far, the emphasis has been based on Nephi's account of the journey in the Old World. Other perspectives are recorded among the Lehites' descendants in the New World. It is to those that I now turn.

The Traditions of the Lamanites

A very different take on the journey through Arabia comes from Laman and Lemuel's progeny as recounted by Zeniff in Mosiah 10:12–16. According to his description of the Lamanites:

> 12. They were a wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, believing in the tradition of their fathers, which is this — Believing that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren, and they were also wronged while crossing the sea;
>
> 13. And again, that they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance, after they had crossed the sea. …
>
> 14. And his brethren were wroth with him … they were also wroth with him upon the waters. …
>
> 15. And again, they were wroth with him when they had arrived in the promised land. …
>
> 16. And again, they were wroth with him because he departed into the wilderness [of the jungle].

Again, where is Bountiful in all of this? Did Laman and Lemuel not consider themselves wronged in Bountiful? Obviously they did. Zeniff makes it clear that the Lamanites felt "wronged" because Nephi "took the lead of their journey in the wilderness" (Mosiah 10:13) and because

he instructed, cajoled, chided, reminded, prompted, taught, urged, encouraged, rebuked, scolded, and admonished his older brothers. Did this "wronging by Nephi's assuming leadership" continue in Bountiful? Of course, it did. The group had no sooner pitched their tents upon arrival in Bountiful than Nephi "did exhort my brethren to faithfulness and diligence" — and he obviously took the leadership in constructing the ship. Predictably, "they began to murmur against me" (1 Nephi 17:15, 17). Nothing changed in Bountiful. In fact, the brothers became so angry with Nephi's "wronging them" that they again attempted to murder him (v. 48).

That Zeniff gave such a comprehensive description of the perceived "wrongings" in the several wilderness situations, without specifically mentioning Bountiful, is startling. It is also revealing. Unless Bountiful was deliberately and intentionally skipped, which seems unimaginable, the Lamanite traditions included Bountiful within the general category of being "wronged in the wilderness."

Mosiah's and Alma's Reminders to Their Sons

A different New-World perspective on the trek occurred when King Benjamin explained to his son Mosiah that the Liahona stopped working when the Lehites "were unfaithful … [so they] were *driven back* … and were smitten with famine" (Mosiah 1:17). Similarly, Alma reminded his son Helaman that when the Liahona stopped working "they did not travel a *direct course*, and were afflicted with hunger" (Alma 37:42). Indeed, Nephi indicates that they hungered during their journey. Likewise, they could have had "difficulty in locating the next oasis to make their base camp — and were instead 'driven *back,*'" presumably to the last known water source when the Liahona stopped working, *prior* to Bountiful.[38] It is equally clear that when the Liahona stopped working *after* Bountiful, they "knew not whither they should steer the ship" (i.e., it didn't travel in "a *direct course*") and they were "driven back upon the waters" (1 Nephi 18:13) and likely had times of hunger. The Liahona was their lifeline for survival during those times.

But what about in Bountiful? Was the Liahona their lifeline during those several years as well? It must have been. It doesn't seem credible that they would put the Liahona away as they entered the oasis of Bountiful and then take it back out once they launched into the ocean.

38. Timothy Gervais and John L. Joyce, "'By Small Means': Rethinking the Liahona," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 30 (2018): 221, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/by-small-means-rethinking-the-liahona/.

That would seem to contradict Nephi's account. He needed help to find many things in Bountiful. He surely needed the Liahona "to find iron ore" (1 Nephi 17:10), to find additional flint, to find the right trees to utilize, to find meat and game, and to find "what manner I should work the timbers of the ship" (1 Nephi 18:1). "The Lord showed unto me great things" (1 Nephi 18:3), and the Liahona was likely the vehicle for much of all this finding and showing. King Benjamin's and Alma's point was that the Liahona "was prepared to show unto our fathers the course which they should travel *in the wilderness*" (Alma 37:39) all the time and every time, including *before, during*, and *after* Bountiful. Bountiful was not skipped; it was part of the "wilderness."

The Words of the Lord about Bountiful as a *Wilderness*

A final piece of evidence of an association between Bountiful and the concept of *midbar* is to read what the Lord himself had to say about Bountiful being a *wilderness*. When he asked Nephi to reflect upon his tender mercies, he did not say, "Here you are, safely in Bountiful. Now look back at the means that I provided for you, back then, in the desert." No, he continued to provide means. He said to Nephi in 1 Nephi 17:13, and this when Nephi *first entered* Bountiful and before they arrived in the New World: "And I *will also be* [note the future tense] your light in the *wilderness*; and I will *prepare the way* [future tense] before you … [and] ye shall be led [future tense] towards *the promised land*; and ye shall know [future tense] that it is by me that ye are led."

The Lord was not just talking about merely providing a physical light for their nighttime travel through the desert (past tense). Yes, he had been their light; but he promised to continue to be their light. The "light in the wilderness" (whether physical light, spiritual light, or both) did not end when the desert ended (past tense). It is expressed in the future tense. In this scriptural promise, which was given at the very *beginning* of the Lehites' many years in Bountiful, the Lord promised to remain their "light" in the *wilderness* of Bountiful and on the waters, just as he can be our light in *our* wildernesses. He next tellingly says, "*After* ye have arrived in the promised land, ye shall know that I, the Lord, am God; and that I, the Lord, did deliver you from destruction" (v. 14). He is telling Nephi that he (Nephi) will look back over the entire experience — desert, Bountiful, and the oceans — and see that the "means" were "provided" the whole time (v. 3). By asking Nephi to recognize that he had been "their light in the *wilderness*" and would continue to be their

light in the future (in Bountiful), it appears that the Lord himself is calling Bountiful a part of the wilderness.

Speeds and Stops Through Arabia

Having discussed the diversity of meanings of *wilderness*, which seems to include Bountiful, the next point to consider is what this alternative reading might reveal about the *timing* of the various events that took place during their trek across Arabia. If we can suspend, at least for the sake of this discussion, the restriction imposed by assuming that the eight years were just the desert portion, we can reexamine the specific rest stops along the journey. I will also discuss the three speculations that attempt to fill the "missing" years required by the traditional interpretation.

The desert portion of the trek has been extensively covered in many scholarly discussions, especially by Warren Aston in his many publications. I will cover some of the same ground, but my focus will be on estimates of the time spent reaching each stopping point and the time of the activities that took place there. It is primarily about the timing that the various scholars disagree. Yet it is the timing of the trek that is most pertinent in calculating how long the Lehites sojourned in Bountiful.

Overall Distances and Reasonable Speeds

Let's begin the discussion with the overall distances involved in the desert trek portion of the journey. From Jerusalem to Nahom (near Sana'a, Yemen) is 1,500 miles. The group then turned eastward to reach the entrance to Bountiful, which was likely Khor Kharfot, just 15 to 20 miles past the eastern Yemeni border into the country of modern-day Oman. That last leg, through harsh terrain, adds some 700 miles. The total distance along Lehi's Trail from Jerusalem to Bountiful, then, is roughly 2,200 miles.[39] This is the same distance as from Salt Lake City to New York City.

Lehi and his group suffered scarcity of food, only occasional water, daytime heat and nighttime cold, and travel by foot or by camel. Essentially, all experts agree that they used camels,[40] but a camel's

39. Mileage estimates come from Google Maps (website), https://www.google.com/maps; but are only approximate because the maps are based on existing roads, and there is no road down the long wadi route of Wadi Sayq to Khor Kharfot. (The distance to Khor Rori would be even farther.) That calculation of 2,200 miles agrees exactly with the mileage given by Brown, "Refining the Spotlight," 45.

40. Jeff Lindsay notes, "By Lehi's day, domesticated camels were in widespread use on trade routes in Arabia, and it is entirely plausible that someone embarking

role was primarily to carry provisions and tents. Sometimes travelers also "journeyed taking turns to walk and ride,"[41] but according to one observer on a camel train in 1888, riding was usually reserved for "small children, the aged, the sick, and even bed-rid folk."[42]

Figure 1. A possible map of the travels of Lehi and his group.

Perhaps a better equivalency for the Arabian trek is the shorter "Mormon Trail" of the early pioneers. The Mormon Trail was similar in that both involved walking (for healthy adults), scarcity of food and water, rough terrain, and almost impenetrable barriers. The major

on a trip south of Israel would have used camels" (Lindsay, "Joseph and Dream Map: Part 1," 169). Warren Aston asserts that Lehi's use of tents "virtually assures us that the departure from Jerusalem used camels, not mules or donkeys, as the primary means of carrying their belongings," Warren P. Aston, "Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah's Escape from Jerusalem — Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019), 101.

41. Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Desert*, ed. Edward Garnett (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), 49.

42. Ibid, 95.

difference is that the distance of the Mormon Trail was 1,000 miles less than the travel down the coast of Arabia.[43]

In addition to distances involved in the trek, travel speeds need to be factored in. Kent Brown, and most other scholars, believe that Lehi's camel caravan "was traveling about twenty miles per day, or perhaps fewer."[44] The Book of Mormon Central (now, Scripture Central) team points out that "Lehi would likely have fled Jerusalem as quickly as possible, pushing his traveling party much faster than under normal travel conditions."[45] Talking only about the initial 180 miles from Jerusalem to the tip of the eastern fork of the Red Sea (Eilat or Aqaba),[46] they conclude that the family could have accomplished "an average of only 20 to 25 miles (32–40 km) per day."[47] Had the group been able to maintain that rate of travel for the entire trek down to what is now Oman, and with no long rest stops, they would have arrived in Bountiful in slightly less than four months. That speed is highly unlikely, because it was simply not sustainable, and we know they took rest stops. A more realistic speed is closer to the rate of the Mormon pioneers, who were "making about 13 miles a day"[48] traveling to their Promised Land in Utah.[49] Applying the speed of the Mormon pioneers to the Lehites' trek yields a result of six months.

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43. FamilySearch Wiki, s.v. "Mormon Trail," last updated May 10, 2023, 12:56, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Mormon_Trail#:~:text=The%20original%201846%2D1847%20Mormon,1%2C300%20mile%20(2%2C092%20km).

44. S. Kent Brown, "The Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 66, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol16/iss1/8/. See also Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 53–54.

45. "How Could Lehi Travel from Jerusalem to the Red Sea in 3 Days?," Book of Mormon Central, February 1, 2018, https://bookofmormoncentral.org/qa/how-could-lehi-travel-from-jerusalem-to-the-red-sea-in-3-days.

46. The modern-day Israeli resort town of Eilat and the modern Jordanian resort city of Aqaba lie at the tip of the eastern fork of the Red Sea (see Figure 1). Both were small settlements around the time of Lehi.

47. "How Could Lehi Travel from Jerusalem to the Red Sea in 3 Days?"

48. Linda Thatcher, "The Mormon Trail: A Photographic Exhibit," *History to Go* (blog), June 2, 2016, https://historytogo.utah.gov/mormon-trail-exhibit/#:~:text=Making%20about%2013%20miles%20a,124%20miles%20from%20Fort%20Laramie.

49. The very first immigrants were even slower: "The first 1847 company traveled more than 1,000 miles by wagon in 111 days," which calculates to an average of only nine miles per day. Christine T. Cox, "Mormon Pioneer Emigration Facts," *Church History*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, March 6, 2018, https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/mormon-pioneer-emigration-facts.

As noted earlier, these speeds create a problem, given Nephi's apparent report that the journey prior to Bountiful required eight years. To resolve this, scholars have speculated that they spent multiple *years* — as many as six or seven — in one or more sites along the route. As Kent Brown puts it, "The eight-year duration of the wilderness experience suggests that … the family must have spent a considerable period in at least one location."[50] No, there is another possibility: the alternative interpretation, which includes Bountiful in the eight years. That would allow the trip through the desert to be much faster.

In the next section of the paper, I present estimated times at the major stopping points along the way. I also discuss the three speculations that attempt to account for the "missing" years of the traditional reading of 1 Nephi 17:4–5. Here, I ask the reader's indulgence, as considerable detail will be needed to critique each speculation. I then return to timing estimates for the major stopping points of the Lehites' journey.

Speculation 1: Sluggishness Caused Slow Progress to Allow Comparison with Moses

The first speculation is not a full-blown theory as much as an observation. Don Bradley notes in passing that Lehi and his party were spiritually sluggish, just like the children of Israel under Moses.[51] For that reason, and to emphasize similarities between Moses and Nephi, the Lord permitted (or implicitly, "arranged") for them to wander at an extremely slow overall pace throughout the journey. That slowdown was ostensibly in order for readers to draw a parallel between the Lehites' exodus from apostate Jerusalem and the exodus of Moses from out of slavery in Egypt.[52] In his words,

50. S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 58.

51. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2019), 155.

52. A parallel of the children of Israel and the Lehites is readily drawn. Nephi himself makes this comparison (1 Nephi 4:1–4) and several scholars have pointed to this parallel. For example, Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 75; Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 22–24; and Terrence L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 38–51, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/nephi-and-exodus.

> In both the biblical and Book of Mormon exoduses, the people … moved toward their respective promised lands with *painful sluggishness*. The Israelites wandered 40 years to traverse the distance between Egypt and Palestine. The Lehites … managed to take eight years to go from Jerusalem to the bottom of the Arabian Peninsula — a pace of about 5 miles per *week*.[53]

A speed of five miles per week, or less than a mile per day, seems highly unlikely, inefficient, and contrary to Nephi's choice of wording, which suggests fairly rapid travel between specific, named, oasis stopping points. In addition, consider the nature of their tents. An Arabian tent compound was far from a cluster of collapsible pup-tents. According to an 1888 description, "The Arab tent … [is], strong and rude … and may last out, they say, a generation, only wearing thinner."[54] Those tents were not only large and bulky, they were incredibly heavy. Aston notes that "even a single panel of a desert tent is a heavy and awkward item, weighing hundreds of pounds."[55] Hilton and Hilton estimate that the full tents weighed around 500 pounds each.[56] Erecting several such huge, heavy, and complex tents to form a compound for just one night and afterwards striking the heavy tents and reloading the camels would have consumed much of a day at each end. It would not have taken place unless the group was staying for at least a few weeks. That may be why Nephi takes the time and space on the plates to record the setting up of the tents as significant and worth mentioning. In fact, while traveling "the space of many days" to the next watering hole, they would not have used their tents at all. Rather, they would have snatched what sleep they could during brief stops as they traveled by day when possible or by night when the heat became unbearable. Either way, they would not have had the luxury of setting up their luxurious and spacious Bedouin desert tents. Writing in 1865, Palgrave eloquently describes typical Arabian desert practice:

> Then an insufficient halt for rest or sleep, at most of two or three hours, soon, interrupted by the oft-repeated admonition, "if we linger here we all die of thirst," sounding in our ears;

53. Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 155.
54. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Desert*, 60.
55. Aston, "Into Arabia," 101.
56. Hilton and Hilton, *Discovering Lehi*, 18.

> and then to remount our jaded beasts and push them on through the dark night.[57]

They simply would not have loaded up the camels with their massive tents, all their provisions, their abundant seeds, and so on, and then traveled just a mile or two, only to unload the camels and set up their all their heavy tents again. That defies logic. And there is still another piece of evidence of the group's rapid, not sluggish, travel speed. This one was pointed out by a helpful anonymous reviewer of an early draft of this paper. He suggested that since the Lord told the party not to "make much fire" (1 Nephi 17:12), that indicated, at least to that reviewer, that the Lehites "were hiding or at risk from others. Such a risk would be a motivation to hurry and not delay when passing through dangerous regions."

Nor is there textual support for the idea that they ever "wandered," although that may be a logical assumption to fill some of the missing time. But the text seems to indicate that they were being specifically directed by the Liahona; and even the few times that their faith lagged and the Liahona stopped working, they seem to have been immobilized in place. There is no indication that they "wandered" aimlessly. To the contrary, Nephi's account provides clear directions and clear timeframes. Then, too, they were often crossing barren deserts, and "to lose one's way in the desert was almost certain death."[58]

The implication that they were usually or frequently spiritually sluggish, like the children of Israel, also does not hold up to scrutiny. Bradley notes that

> Lehi's band failed to progress in their journey when they failed to give "heed and diligence" to God. … The Lehites failed to progress due to the Liahona ceasing to work when their "faith and diligence waned." … The Lehites' journey to the Promised Land continued to echo the Israelite wandering in the wilderness, even while they crossed the ocean.[59]

In other words, the multi-year delay was caused by the lack of faith of the Lehites, just like the Hebrews under Moses. There is unquestionably a degree of validity in this comparison. Nephi points to the comparison in his admonition to his brothers, especially in 1 Nephi 17:23–30 and 42. But there are far more differences in the groups than similarities, and

57. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey*, 1:12.
58. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "desert."
59. Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 155–56.

we must not overstate the resemblances. In fact, there are at least three glaring differences.

First, the children of Israel had been slaves who obeyed overlords. They needed time to find out who they were and how to handle their new freedom, how to become a cohesive and united body. Further, they needed to prepare for battle in an occupied land. By contrast, the Lehites were highly educated, upper-class, family members who were fleeing from, not toward, an established society.[60] They were not ignorant slaves. There were, likewise, no enemies to defeat once they arrived in the Promised Land.

Second, there was a huge difference in timeframes. The "exodus" of Lehi/Nephi took, at most, eight years and, as we will see, perhaps much less — not 40 years. It seems unlikely that the Lord dragged out the trek to underscore a lesson that was already apparent and made clear by Nephi himself.[61]

Third, there was a vast difference in the spiritual level of the groups. Most of the Lehites were not consistently spiritually sluggish. The text simply does not support that reading. Other than when she believed all four of her sons were dead, Sariah never faltered. Camille Fronk notes that "children were the focus of life for women in ancient Israel. Only in their roles as mothers did Israelite women receive honor and authority."[62] A temporary and grief-induced anger against her husband and even against God seems entirely understandable. Similarly, Lehi murmured only one time, when Nephi's bow broke and they had no food (1 Nephi 16:20). Almost immediately, he was truly "chastened because of his murmuring against the Lord (v. 24), insomuch that he was brought down into the depths of sorrow" (v. 25).

Overall, the Lehites come across as faithful, at least most of the time. When one examines the full story closely and despite their characterization in talks and lessons, even Laman and Lemuel were not spiritually sluggish most of the time. It is obvious that they had periods of complaining, rebellion, and even attempted murder, but those periods were actually just occasional.

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60. Noel Reynolds believes that Lehi had been a wealthy and educated scribe, and Nephi was following in his footsteps. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Last Nephite Scribes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 95–137, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-last-nephite-scribes/.

61. Aston discusses briefly the parallels between Moses and Lehi/Nephi in *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 12.

62. Camille Fronk, "Desert Epiphany: Sariah and the Women in 1 Nephi," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no 2 (2000): 9.

Based on the work of Margaret Barker, several scholars are pursuing a possible paradigm shift. Grant Hardy, Neal Rappleye, Val Larsen, Kevin Christensen, and others are arguing that much of the conflict between the Lehi-Nephi-led side of the family and the Laman-Lemuel-led side may have been based on differing acceptance of the Deuteronomist reforms of King Josiah, and not on spiritual sluggishness on the part of anyone.[63] In other words, Laman and his followers may not have been rejecting God as much as they were rejecting Lehi's "out-of-date" pre-reform ways. In the extreme, the desire to kill their brother and even their father was not "murder." Rappleye points out that Josiah's reforms may have justified, and even mandated, the killing of false prophets and that Laman and Lemuel saw their father and their brother as exactly that, as false prophets.[64] According to Val Larsen and Newell Wright, "Laman and Lemuel behave as the book [that] Josiah received mandates they behave. … [They] are motivated by fierce piety."[65] In Hardy's words, "Whatever else they may have been, Laman and Lemuel appear to have been orthodox, observant Jews."[66] Val Larsen even calls them "pious."[67]

Nephi certainly does not describe his brothers as *pious*. Nor do they sound pious when they mock Nephi's revelation to build a ship

63. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33; Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 16 (2015): 87–99, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-deuteronomist-reforms-and-lehis-family-dynamics-a-social-context-for-the-rebellions-of-laman-and-lemuel/; Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 217–64, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/; and Kevin Christensen, "Twenty Years After 'Paradigms Regained,' Part 1: The Ongoing, Plain, and Precious Significance of Margaret Barker's Scholarship for Latter-day Saint Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 1–64, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/twenty-years-after-paradigms-regained-part-1-the-ongoing-plain-and-precious-significance-of-margaret-barkers-scholarship-for-latter-day-saint-studies/.

64. Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms," 94.

65. Val Larsen and Newell Wright, "Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 56 (2023): 295, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/theosis-in-the-book-of-mormon-the-work-and-glory-of-the-father-mother-and-son-and-holy-ghost/.

66. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 39.

67. Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram," 235.

(1 Nephi 17:17), when they "make themselves merry … and speak with much rudeness," and bind Nephi while crossing the ocean (1 Nephi 18: 9–11). So we are left with two conflicting theories. Laman and Lemuel were either (1) paragons of evil and rebellion who may be spiritually asleep, as Lehi later describes them, or (2) pious defenders of "competing religious ideologies."[68] How does one resolve these two extreme views? Noel Reynolds provides one possible resolution when he writes that Laman and Lemuel "may be invoking reformist perspectives *to justify* their rebellions. But I interpret Nephi to be portraying these invocations as convenient *rationalizations*."[69]

Leaving aside the debate over the Deuteronomistic theory, let's consider the softer side of Laman and Lemuel, based only on Nephi's text. It may come as a surprise that almost two dozen instances in the record are clearly positives, not negatives. These positives are not often recognized and even less often enumerated:

1. They left their comfortable lifestyles to follow their "visionary" father and his "foolish imaginations" (1 Nephi 2:11).
2. They agreed to return to Jerusalem, a multi-week trip, for what seemed a hopeless mission (1 Nephi 3:5, 9).
3. After Laban attempted to slay them (3:13), they "did follow [Nephi]" (1 Nephi 4:4) to make a second attempt.
4. After a rage, they "did soften their hearts … were sorrowful and did plead … that I would forgive them" (1 Nephi 7:19–20).
5. When Nephi "did exhort them that they would pray … it came to pass that they did so" (1 Nephi 7:21).
6. Back in the Valley of Lemuel, "my brethren … did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings" (1 Nephi 7:22).
7. Later, they were interested enough in their father's teachings to be "disputing one with another" (1 Nephi 15:2).
8. Once Nephi explained Isaiah's teachings "they were pacified and did humble themselves before the Lord" (1 Nephi 15:20)
9. They were interested enough to ask, "What meaneth this thing which our father saw in a dream?" (1 Nephi 15:21).
10. Once Nephi explained the "hard things" (1 Nephi 16:1), they "did humble themselves before the Lord" (1 Nephi 16:5).

68. Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms," 99.
69. Reynolds, "The Nephite Metaphor," 235, emphasis added.

11. When Nephi's replacement bow resulted in meat, "they did humble themselves before the Lord" (1 Nephi 16:32).
12. Their rebellion in Nahom was followed by rapid and sincere repentance, which the Lord accepted (1 Nephi 16:39).
13. After being "shocked" by Nephi (17:53–54), "they were about to worship me [Nephi]" (1 Nephi 17:55).
14. Nephi stopped that inappropriate worship, and Laman and Lemuel instead "did worship the Lord." (1 Nephi 18:1).
15. Then they "did go forth with me; and we did work [heavy manual labor on the ship]" (1 Nephi 18:1) for several years.
16. They said of the ship "that the workmanship was exceedingly fine" (1 Nephi 18:4), which was a humble reversal of their earlier mockery (1 Nephi 17:17–18).
17. At sea, they "began to make themselves merry" but "repented" and "loosed me [Nephi]" (1 Nephi 18:20).
18. That was followed by "a great calm" (1 Nephi 18:21) of waves but also a lack of turbulence from Laman and Lemuel (presumably for months).
19. In the New World, they helped Nephi. "till … and plant" (1 Nephi 18:24). And "find … beasts" and "ore" (1 Nephi 18:25).
20. Following these mutual discoveries, they allowed Nephi to "teach … and … read many things" (1 Nephi 19:22–23) including 49 verses of Isaiah (1 Nephi 19:24 to 21:26).
21. After Nephi read from the plates of brass, "my brethren came unto me" to ask "what meaneth these things?" (1 Nephi 22:1).
22. They allowed their father, Lehi, to also speak "many things unto them" (2 Nephi 1:1), including what must have seemed to be rubbing salt in the wounds, a pleading to "hearken unto the voice of Nephi" (2 Nephi 1:28).

These 22 instances are not consistent with the behaviors of men who are the personification of evil. Rather, *most* of the time, Laman and Lemuel sound quite compliant. Yes, the infrequent flare-ups were intense; but those flare-ups were generally impulsive, irrational, and brief. The brothers come across, not as villains, but as emotional children throwing infantile tantrums of jealousy — although with the extreme actions and violence of adult men. If anything, their behavior comes across as decidedly bipolar. It ranged from brief and impulsive outbursts to brief and impulsive repentance and even worship, while twice bowing down to worship their little brother. Despite the infrequent negative outbursts,

there were much longer periods of repentance and compliance. Rather than symbols of evil, they are symbols of vacillation. That symbolism is ideal. We, too, are at neither end-point of being celestial beings or telestial villains; most of us consistently vacillate as well.

This discussion is not meant to excuse Laman and Lemuel's horrendous behavior on multiple occasions. It is to point out that most of the time, they were obedient, if reluctantly so. It may be a mistake to judge that Laman and Lemuel were "sluggish." Nephi and Alma make it clear that the Lehites had occasional times of slothfulness (Alma 37: 41–43), but that is not enough to support the idea that the trek was extended because of constant "sluggishness" or to intensify and underscore the similarities between Nephi and Moses. It was not enough to stretch eight months into eight years.

Still, we must estimate just how much time the Lehites remained in any of the four primary stops that Nephi describes. Although not always the case, traveling pauses for Arabian camel caravans — pauses long enough to justify setting up their tents — still tended to be brief, just enough to catch whatever rest they could and replenish their supplies. And that seems to be what Nephi describes. Writing about typical Arabian caravans, Hugh Nibley tells us that "from ten to twelve days is the average time a Bedouin encampment of ordinary size will remain on the same ground," although "they remain often for a whole month."[70]

And there is another problem. As Brown points out, "There were now a number of teenagers and young adults who would consume much of the available food supply. The longer they camped, the more the group would have eaten."[71] Based on all of these facts — the hints of rapid travel, the aging of the seeds for the New World, and that the scriptural record does not talk of any long-term layovers —any multi-year residencies at any of the stops described by Nephi appear unlikely. Let's examine the text of 1 Nephi for more realistic timeframes for traveling to each of the stops and the time spent in each one.

An Estimate of Time Spent Getting Out of Jerusalem

Lehi, like his contemporary, Jeremiah, proclaimed various warnings and woes upon the people of Jerusalem. Chief among them was, first, the destruction of a city that most citizens believed would be protected by God. A second warning was that the many Israelites would be carried away into captivity in Babylon (1 Nephi 1:13). The people initially "did

70. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 54.
71. Brown, *Refining the Spotlight*, 48.

mock [Lehi] because of the things which he testified" (v. 19), but that quickly escalated, and they "sought his life, that they might take it away" (v. 20). If one considers the Deuteronomist reforms of King Josiah, along with the intensity of their anger, the extreme reaction might have been because Lehi was (1) preaching a suffering servant Messiah and not a liberating warrior Messiah, (2) testifying "of their wickedness and their abominations" (v. 19), and (3) was preaching a Mother God and a Son of God (both ideas being rejected by the Deuteronomists). Of course, many readers simply assume that the excessive anger was attributable to the evil of the people of Jerusalem, while Lehi was righteous. It was most likely some combination of those causes.

In any case, and presumably like his contemporary Jeremiah, Lehi could not stop testifying, because the Lord's "word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones … and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9). Only after he was commanded by the Lord to "take his family and depart into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 2:2) did Lehi take the death threats seriously and cease preaching. He was warned that "this people … seek to take away thy life" (v. 1).

Based on that divine warning, it is tempting to imagine a frantic overnight scramble to secure camels, load them with essentials, and race out of town, precipitously leaving "his house … and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things and [taking] nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents" (v. 4). One commentator uses the words *escape* and *fleeing*,"[72] which make his departure sound like a desperate scramble to get away. That may or may not be accurate. To me, Nephi's account does not sound as if a crazed mob was imminently charging toward the house, carrying pitchforks and blazing firebrands. The Lord actually said that "they *seek* to take away thy life" (v. 2). If *seek* means "planning or plotting," Lehi might have had more time, perhaps as much as a week or two, to plan a more organized, but still rapid, exit. Lehi likely would not have had enough tents on hand and certainly not enough seed for a New World, which would have taken at least a few days to procure. In his account, Nephi used the calmer word *depart* (v. 2). Moreover, the leaving of Lehi's "precious things" (v. 4) may have been a calculated decision rather than an oversight in a desperate panic to get away. Although it could have been overnight or the next day, a more measured departure suggests an extremely generous estimate of *half a month* for the departure from Jerusalem.

72. Aston, "Into Arabia," 102.

Travel From Jerusalem to the Valley of Lemuel

The group then traveled approximately the 180 to 250 miles (depending on route[73]) to Eilat or Aqaba. "And he came down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea" (1 Nephi 2:5). This was a journey that would have taken around two weeks. Still not safe and feeling vulnerable to Jewish travelers potentially taking news of his location back to Jerusalem, Lehi felt the need to avoid a stay in either town. Perhaps hearing about the *Wadi Tayyib al-Ism* from locals, they traveled an additional "*three days* in the wilderness, [where] he pitched his tent in a valley by the side of a river of water" (vv. 5–6). Lehi renamed the *Wadi Tayyib al-Ism* as the "Valley of Lemuel" to create an object lesson of stability.[74] This leg of the journey, traveling from Jerusalem to the Valley of Lemuel, took another half a month.

Speculation 2: Growing Crops in the Valley of Lemuel

The question is what did they do in the Valley and, more importantly, how long were they there? We now encounter the second speculation. The discussion may again appear to veer off-topic, but it is necessary to carefully examine the validity of what this speculation asserts. This speculation is the most popular one for filling in the missing years. The assertion is that Lehi and his family spent several growing seasons, hence several years, living in the Valley of Lemuel. Aston guesses that most of the "eight years in the wilderness" may have been spent here, "apparently to augment those [seeds] brought from Jerusalem … and long enough to include at least one growing season."[75] (Aston makes a similar claim about growing crops in Shazer and Nahom, discussed later.)

Let's take a closer look at this idea of growing crops in the Valley of Lemuel. I again ask the reader's indulgence in so doing, and I offer the assurance that this detail is necessary to replace a speculation designed to try to "fill the time." I return to a more realistic estimate of the time spent in the Valley of Lemuel following this discussion.

There are several considerations that make speculation 2 problematic, as discussed in the following sections.

The Seeds Came from the Land of Jerusalem

First and most decisive, Nephi specifically tells us that the seeds were not grown in the Valley of Lemuel. Nephi writes that when they arrived in

73. Ibid., 104.
74. Brown, "The Hunt for the Valley."
75. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 45.

the New World, "we began to plant seeds; yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 18:24). If we take Nephi at his word, and surely most readers will want to do that, the word "all" would preclude the possibility that any of the seeds came from a bounteous crop grown in the Valley of Lemuel (or Shazer, or Nahom), or anywhere else along the way. Keep in mind, as the discussion continues, that there was not merely a large number of seeds but also a widely varying assortment ("all manner of seeds of every kind" (1 Nephi 8:1). The account clearly states that that "all" came from "the land of Jerusalem."[76] Any idea of the seeds being "augmented" here or anywhere else does not come from the text.

Nobody Anticipated Growing Crops

Neither Lehi nor Nephi appear to have known, in the very beginning, the exact reason why the Lord commanded Lehi to depart from Jerusalem, other than to preserve his life. Nephi didn't know why until his second theophany when the Lord revealed that "ye shall … be led to a land of promise" (1 Nephi 2:20). Nephi returned "to the tent of my father" (1 Nephi 3:1) to tell him the news. If Lehi had already known, he had apparently not shared it. It was not until Sariah's panic that their sons had "perish[ed] in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 5:2) that he comforted her by telling her, "I have obtained a land of promise" (v. 5). Laman and Lemuel apparently knew by the time they recruited Ishmael's family that they "shall obtain the land of promise" (1 Nephi 7:13), but probably not much earlier. If Laman and Lemuel, probably Zoram, and Ishmael's family were initially ignorant of the full scope of their mission, it's hard to imagine how Lehi could have recruited their labor to grow a widely varied and large crops of fruits, grains, and vegetables, not to eat, but to produce seeds for long-term storage. Kent Brown reminds us that "Lehi carried the main batch of seeds specifically for planting in the promised land. He evidently planted none along the way."[77]

There was no Fertile Garden Area in the Valley

Even if Lehi had been able to recruit labor and had planted some of the sacred seeds meant for the New World, there is yet another problem. There was no fertile garden area in the Wadi Tayyib al-Ism (the Valley of Lemuel) in which to grow crops. The gorge was too narrow and shadowed

76. Claiming that Nephi meant for the "land of Jerusalem" to include the Valley of Lemuel is an unlikely stretch, especially since Nephi was writing for his family or for us and had already explained the geography quite precisely.

77. Brown, *Refining the Spotlight*, 48.

to grow anything at the Red Sea end. It widens out to the southeast, but that area was still an arid corner of desert, not fertile farmland.[78] The average rainfall in northwest Arabia totals 100 millimeters [4 inches] or less per year, which is far from the amount needed for cultivation"[79] And even that small amount cannot be counted on to be regular. "[Sudden] rain storms … came with such force that [they] created spurting jets of water [flash floods] … leaving only temporary pools of standing water."[80]

Lehi was not a Large-Scale Farmer

Lehi and Nephi, or both, have been described as "a model sheikh of the desert,"[81] "a smelter and trader in precious metals,"[82] a caravanner,[83] metal worker,[84] whitesmiths, workers of precious metals[85] and "highly trained … scribes" and scholars.[86] Nephi was also a "master sword smith,"[87] a master shipbuilder and ship navigator, a skilled woodworker who not only constructed a replacement wooden bow, which Nibley describes as "something of a miracle,"[88] but "did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood." He was also a skilled stonemason who "did build a temple … and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine" (2 Nephi 5:15, 16). Finally, he was an eloquent spiritual and political leader and king. All of that is a staggering resumé for anyone; are we now to accept that Lehi and Nephi were also skilled and successful, large-scale farmers?[89] There is simply little to no credible evidence that they

78. Aston, "Into Arabia," 99–126.

79. Brown, "Hunt for the Valley," 67.

80. Ibid.

81. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 43.

82. Aston, "Into Arabia," 101. See also Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 12.

83. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 36.

84. John Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, UT: Horizon, 2004), 9395. See also Warren P. Aston, "Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah: 'Truth Shall Spring Out of the Earth,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 20.

85. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 81–130. Also see Aston, "Into Arabia," 101; and Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 12.

86. Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 214, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes/.

87. Potter, "Khor Rori," 284.

88. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 61.

89. Note, however, that they did "till the earth, and … plant seeds once in the New World" (1 Nephi 18:24).

had the knowledge or ability to conduct extensive farming in the Valley of Lemuel. Making that even less credible is that they ostensibly grew this large-scale and multi-varied crop in a challenging, arid ground and with excessive temperatures that would preclude most crops setting fruit, even if they were able to sprout. Even in the unlikely event that Lehi can be imagined to be an experienced farmer, nobody, not even an seasoned grower, can make a wide variety of crops grow in a desert. In addition to those problems, S. Kent Brown asks another excellent question: "There is also the matter of arable land where Lehi might plant seeds. Would not local people claim such ground?"[90]

Lehi and Sarah Lacked a Labor Force

The main strength and vigor of Lehi's labor force was not available. Even if they had unnamed servants with them,[91] and there is no solid evidence of that; the labor force was still tiny. Laman, Lemuel, Nephi, Sam were away for arguably several months, which spanned most of a full growing season. Not only that, they had not yet recruited Ishmael and his family. Where was the labor force? Could an older Lehi and Sariah, even with the possible help of daughters, have tilled, planted, watered, weeded, harvested, threshed, and bagged the seeds by themselves?

The Timing of the Trips and the Growing Conflict

Consider also the timeframe. The text says that "we had gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind" (8:1), this immediately after it recounts the return of the sons. True, one could read "gathered" as "harvested," but that also seems unlikely, given the immediacy of the sons' return with Ishmael's family. They ostensibly returned and immediately harvested. This would be a remarkable coincidence, and it totally overlooks the fact that the crops were highly varied and wouldn't have all been harvested at the same time anyway. That immediacy is obscured, because the two events, the return and the "gathering," are reported in separate chapters in the current edition of the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 7:22 and 8:1). They sound like two entirely different activities; but they weren't. In the original Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the text of the sons' return and the text of the gathering of the seeds are reported in the same chapter and even on the same line. Moreover, the text doesn't actually say they "gathered" anything. The text uses the past perfect tense "we

90. Brown, "Refining the Spotlight," 48.

91. Newell Wright, email correspondence to Godfrey Ellis, December 28, 2022.

had gathered." This suggests that they returned with the seeds already "gathered," that is, "purchased" in Jerusalem (more on this shortly).

An Absence of Available Wild Fruits and Grains

Some commentators have speculated that "gathered" literally means "gathered," and that the family merely picked existing seeds from spontaneously growing plants while they were living in the Valley of Lemuel. There are serious problems with this idea as well.

- Wild figs and dates would not fulfil the requirement of "all manner of seeds *of every kind*, both of grain *of every kind*, and also of the seeds of fruit *of every kind*" (1 Nephi 8:1).
- There was no oasis here to produce spontaneous wild figs or dates growing on their own. Perhaps later in Shazer or Nahom, but not in the *Wadi Tayyib al-Ism*.
- If the Valley of Lemuel had wheat, barley, rye, dates, figs, and olives growing on their own, which seems unlikely given that this area was never described as an oasis. Such a wild crop would almost certainly have been owned by someone else and not be available to be "gathered" freely and in large quantities by total strangers.
- There is some question whether wild dates and figs, if those were the only seeds they had, would even grow "exceedingly" and "in abundance" (1 Nephi 18:24) in MesoAmerica, much less around the Great Lakes area or other new-land areas.
- As already noted, even if wild figs were the seeds to which Nephi refers and were simply "gathered," Nephi would most likely have told us that the seeds came from the Valley of Lemuel in Arabia, not "which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem" (v. 24).

Did They Have the Resources to Purchase Seeds?

It seems more likely that the sons, along with Ishmael and his family, "gathered" the seeds in Jerusalem or as they traveled south through the "land of Jerusalem," as the text reports (v. 24). However, a fair question is to ask *how* they "had gathered" the seeds. As mentioned above, the best possibility is that they *purchased* them, but with what money? After all, the text says that Lehi "left his gold, and his silver, and his precious things" behind when he left Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:4). Worse, the treasure left behind was later stolen by Laban. However, leaving behind the family's "precious things" and treasure does not necessarily mean

they left behind all of the family's financial resources. The "precious things" may have referred to gold bracelets, jewels, silver platters, framed mirrors, and the like. Lehi left all that behind, but that need not tell us that he left all his money behind. It seems irresponsible to take his family out into the desert with no money at all. Thus, it is entirely credible that they lost their "treasure," but still had financial means. Fronk adds an intriguing possibility:

> Nomadic women, such as Bedouin women, possessed one simple locked box to hold their valuables. … Bedouin women also wore their valuables, in the form of coins and jewelry, around their necks and wrists. One wonders whether Sariah did the same. The wealth around her neck or niceties in her box may have gradually disappeared as necessity to survive in the desert required trading or selling them. After all, Nephi said that his father left his possessions behind; he made no such claim for his mother's wearable wealth.[92]

Whether Fronk's musing is correct or not, it is unrealistic to conclude that a group of at least 20 people traveled through 2,200 miles of somewhat populated areas with no financial resources whatsoever.[93] Even in the unlikely event that Lehi and Sariah had no funds, what of Ishmael's resources? We are not told that Ishmael also left his wealth behind. He may well have had considerable resources.

This may be how a caravan of people could have spent months (or, ostensibly, years) successfully passing from water hole to water hole through somewhat populated areas. The "empty quarter" may have truly been empty, but the oases along the Frankincense Trail, and especially at Sana'a (Nahom), were not. Several scholars now assert a social relationship between the Lehites and the local water owners. Travelers were typically "going from public waterhole to public waterhole … along only established routes … [and] where water is precious, waterwells are both known and populated."[94] The Lehites would have needed money to purchase water rights at every oasis they visited, particularly along the Frankincense Trail, and would have interacted with those water owners.

92. Fronk, "Desert Epiphany," 8.

93. My wife and I once visited London, England, where we found ourselves with no ready British currency on hand. That was for merely half a day until we could get to a bank, and that was a surprisingly debilitating and dispiriting experience that we would not wish to repeat. One to eight years in that condition is unthinkable.

94. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (Springville, UT; Cedar Fort, 1996), 7 and 10.

"The few existing wells were well known by Lehi's time, and all were owned by tribes who guarded them closely. Travel to and from these wells could not be undertaken without the permission of the Arab tribes who owned the land."[95]

In addition to water needs, the Hiltons also point out that the Lehites would also have had to purchase birds and small animals. "Nephi tells us on seven occasions that the group offered 'burnt offerings' (animal sacrifices). … Lehi could have purchased or traded for these animals from local Bedouin herders."[96] Kent Brown agrees and offers his opinion that they "purchased [sacrificial animals] locally," adding that "if Lehi offered birds, he likely bought them from someone in the area who raised domesticated fowl."[97] Aston concurs that they were not alone, writing that "Lehi's family had contact with other peoples during the journey" and that "contacts with other people on the journey to Nahom could have been quite frequent."[98] He has repeatedly pointed out that Nahom (*NHM*) was an "already-existing, locally known name,"[99] which strongly implies interaction with local NHM tribal members. In addition, NHM was known as a regional burial site, and Ishmael could not be buried without the payment of a fee, perhaps a significant fee.

Given this evidence of a need for and availability of financial resources, we may conclude that the Lehites also had the means to purchase the seeds in or around Jerusalem. That scenario seems more likely than to speculate that they grew a large and highly varied crop of seeds, grain, and fruit "of every kind" in a desert.

In sum, the speculation that they spent multiple years in the Valley of Lemuel growing seeds is unlikely. This idea is enticing as a way to help fill up some of the missing years required by the traditional reading. However, even if true and despite the objections listed above, two or three years in the Valley of Lemuel would still be insufficient to fill up all eight of the needed years. So what would be a more likely estimate of their time in the Valley?

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95. Richard Wellington and George Potter, "Lehi's Trail," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 27.

96. Hilton and Hilton, *Discovering Lehi*, 10.

97. Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 3.

98. Aston and Aston, "In the Footsteps of Lehi," 10.

99. Aston, "Across Arabia," 13–14.

A More Reasonable Estimate of Time Spent in the Valley

Jeffrey Chadwick, a noted archeologist, estimates that they sojourned in the Valley of Lemuel for just "four months."[100] Kent Brown agrees but then widens the estimate: "There are fewer problems if we assume that the family spent no more than a few months at the first camp, perhaps up to a year. All of the activities rehearsed by Nephi … could have taken place within a few months. … To this point, it appears to me that the family remained at the first camp for only a few months, a year at most."[101]

On the other hand, even if they didn't grow their own crops in the Valley of Lemuel, it is still clear that a lot happened there. There were two trips back to Jerusalem: first, to obtain the Brass Plates (reasonably, two months); and second, to recruit Ishmael's family to join the group (another two months). Plus, at least five weddings took place there (16:7). In addition, the entire Brass Plates were closely read and studied, and profound revelations received. "And all these things did my father see, and hear, and speak, as he dwelt in a tent, in the valley of Lemuel, and also a great many more things, which cannot be written upon these plates" (1 Nephi 9:1). Clearly, they were in the Valley of Lemuel for some time — just not multiple years, as would be required to support the traditional reading.

Given all of the events that took place in the Valley of Lemuel, Chadwick's "four months" seems insufficient and Aston's speculation of multiple years seems unsupported by the text. Brown's other extreme is one full year. I would tend to strike a compromise of eight months but, in the interest of being as accommodating to the traditional estimate of 1 Nephi 17:4–5 as possible, let's accept the high estimate of *one year*.

Travel to the Oasis of Shazer

After leaving the Valley of Lemuel, they "traveled for the space of *four days* … and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer" (1 Nephi 16:13). Notice that Nephi's takes the time and attention to specifically comment that, upon arrival, "we did pitch our tents" (v. 13). That strongly suggests that the setting up of the many tents was a significant and noteworthy activity. Nephi takes the trouble to specifically point out "they pitched their tents" at their arrival at the Camp of the Broken Bow (v. 17), at their arrival at Nahom (v. 33), and at their arrival in Bountiful (1 Nephi 17:6). It is clearly significant, and

100. Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," 73.
101. Brown, "Refining the Spotlight," 48.

it tells us that setting up the tents was not something that happened on a nightly basis along the way.

He also reports that "we did call the name of the place, Shazer" (v. 13). It is not clear why they named the location, since it would have already had a name. This may indicate that they hadn't yet encountered the residents of the area and learned the name. Alternatively, they may have unofficially given the oasis a new name just for themselves. Nibley comments that "Lehi … is following a good old Oriental custom" of naming any water one finds.[102] Several commentators, including Nibley, have suggested that Lehi named the site because of an association between that word and the concept of trees.[103] There may have been an unusual number of trees in that oasis or perhaps the Lehites hadn't seen that many trees for some time. In any case, Shazer is believed to have been the 15-mile-long oasis along the Wadi Agharr. This was also known by the name of Wadi esh Sharma, because it was just east of the town of Sharma.[104] Perhaps the locals called the oasis by one of those names. Warren Aston, based on fieldwork, calls this oasis "the most plausible location for Shazer by far"[105] and asserts that it "can now be identified with a high degree of certainty."[106]

An Estimate of Time Spent at the Oasis of Shazer

Nephi is careful to note that they "pitched their tents" (v. 13) after arriving in Shazer, indicating that they were going to stay for a while. Even so, the stay does not sound like an extended one. It was certainly not multi-year. The only reason that is given for the stop (other than obviously to have

102. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 75

103. Ibid., 78. Also see Jeff Lindsay for a discussion of various possible meanings of this name, most relating it to the prominent presence of trees in that oasis (Jeff Lindsay, "Shazer on Lehi's Trail: Perhaps More Interesting Than You Thought," *Nauvoo Times: True to the Faith*, November 13, 2015, http://www.nauvootimes.com/cgi-bin/nauvoo_column.pl?number=102957&author=jeff-lindsay#.Y9bQenbMJD8.)

104. Jeffrey R. Chadwick notes that the exact location of Shazer is not known but cites Wellington and Potter as claiming that it may have been the Wadi Agharr and called this "remarkably plausible." See Chadwick, "Archeologist's View," 73; Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail"; Lindsay, "Shazer on Lehi's Trail"; and Warren P. Aston, "Nephi's 'Shazer': The Fourth Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020), 53–72, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-shazer-the-fourth-arabian-pillar-of-the-book-of-mormon/.

105. Aston, "Nephi's Shazer," 69.

106. Ibid., 70.

a break near some water and rest for a bit), was to replenish their water and food supply. When traveling in the more fertile areas, they would slay "food by the way, with our bows and our arrows and our stones and our slings" (16:15), likely for the evening meal. At this longer stop by a water supply, the men could take the time to amass a stockpile of meat, presumably so the women could then butcher it into strips to dry as jerky for later travel. Lindsay notes that the Agharr area "is said to be the best hunting in all of Arabia."[107] Wellington and Potter agree that "the best hunting in the entire area was in the mountains of Agharr."[108] How could Joseph Smith have known that?

Confirming that they didn't stay any longer than a few weeks is that very little text is devoted to that rest stop. The entire stay is summarized in just one sentence. That could not have been a multi-year stay or even a season to grow crops. It seems reasonable that Nephi would have mentioned that. In addition, the oasis and its water-rights would have been owned by someone, and the Lehites' financial resources were undoubtedly limited for extended water access. There was probably not enough for a long-term stay unless there was a compelling reason to stay that long and there is no indication of that in the text. However, wanting to give the traditional reading of 1 Nephi 17:4–5 as much benefit of the doubt as possible and to be on the generous end, let's allocate one month of hard hunting and hard work for their stay in Shazer.

Travel to the "Camp of the Broken Bow"

The next viable location for a longish stay is where Nephi broke his bow. The location of that next stopping point, which some have called the "Camp of the Broken Bow," is not definite, but Wellington and Potter point out that "traditional wood that Arabs used to make their bows … grows in a very limited range high in the mountains just west of the trail near the halt of Bishah."[109] That lies about 830 miles to the south (around 425 miles north of Sana'a).

In describing how long it took to get there, Nephi writes only, "after we had traveled for the space of many days, we did pitch our tents" (1 Nephi 16:17). There is little known about Nephi's "space of many days" or "space of a time." His wording is curious, at least to modern readers. I might mention that ancient Hebrew thought is believed by many scholars to

107. Lindsay, "Joseph and Dream Map: Part 1," 214, and Lindsay, "Shazer on Lehi's Trail."

108. Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 30.

109. Ibid, 32.

have been abstract and metaphorical, while modern thought, based on Greek thinking, tends to be highly detailed and concrete. For example, the "space of a home" might be defined by moderns as the square footage of the building. The ancient Hebrews might define the "space of a home" by the emotions and activities that make a house into a home. For them, a home is family; for us, it may be furniture, wall decorations, or square footage. Similarly, time for most moderns is a series of chronological and dated snapshots. For the Hebrews, time is a rhythm of recurring event patterns. Perhaps that is what Alma meant when he said, "all is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men" (Alma 40:8). What may have been of most importance for Nephi in his "space of many days" or the "space of a time"[110] may have been the rhythm of the desert and the rhythm of travel, not the exact number of days in transit.

When the travel was just a few days (three or four), Nephi mentions that specifically (1 Nephi 2:6; 2:13; 18:13, 15). When it was a full year of more, Nephi tells us that, too. However, his "space of many days" or "space of a time" appears to have been a range of months and not an exact number. This perhaps reflects the rhythm of travel rather than the need for accuracy. Fortunately, we can tease out a few hints. Since the distance from Shazer to the Camp of the Broken Bow was approximately 830 miles, the "space of many days" at 13 miles per day meant that they traveled for 60 days or a little over *two months*. This timeframe is close to the next leg of their journey, from the Camp of the Broken Bow to Nahom. This is discussed further below, but it was 425 miles, which works out to be 33 days, or just over one *month*. This estimate of a "space of a time" being around two months is further supported by scripture. When king Mosiah sent out a search party to try to find Zeniff, the wording is scripturally defined: they "wandered *many days* in the wilderness, even *40 days* did they wander" (Mosiah 7:4). Here, the meaning of "many days" is given as "40 days" (or almost two months).[111] We encounter this Hebraic wording several times as we continue further

110. The "space of many days" or the "space of a time" may not have been synonymous; or the "space of many days" may have referred to travel, and the "space of a time" may have referred to being stationary. There doesn't appear to be a way to resolve that difference.

111. Although the number 40 is often symbolic in the Bible, in the Book of Mormon such symbolism is less likely. Nephi specifically avoided using such symbolism in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 25:2–7; see also Jacob 4:14). Even if it were symbolic, metaphorical numbers are almost always at least close to a literal amount as well.

into Nephi's account. Each time, as with this travel time, it appears to be "a couple of months."

So, the travel time from Shazer (the Wadi Agharr) to the Camp of the Broken Bow would have taken around *one month* (the space of a time).

An Estimate of Time Spent in the Camp of the Broken Bow

After having traveled for the "space of many days" from Shazer to the Camp of the Broken Bow, Nephi reports that they stayed in the area for "the space of a time" (1 Nephi 16:17). When they finally stopped to set up their large tents, one can almost hear between the lines that it was a grateful time of rest from the misery of travel. Another Arabian traveler, arriving to just such a welcome oasis, described how "palms grow rich and [there are] sudden round hot springs on the slope. The azure water runs in pools in their shade, delicious to bathe in if modesty allowed."[112] Little wonder that Nephi took the time and space to engrave the tidbits that they were able to finally rest after the fatigue of travel and obtain hot and fresh food. They must have been happy to "pitch our tents for the space of a time" (v. 17).

An estimate of how much time was "the space of a time" must still allow for several events, though none of them could have taken all that long, certainly not multiple years and not the time to grow crops. First, the family had to set up the tents; to rest after being "much fatigued." Then the sons set off for game, only to have Nephi's steel bow break and his brothers' bows lose their springs (vv. 18, 21), "almost certainly" due to a change in humidity.[113] The loss of the bows at precisely the spot where there was bow-making wood[114] is yet another tender mercy that Joseph Smith could not have known about in frontier American in 1820.

In any case, with no food, the families were soon in crisis and predictably began to "murmur exceedingly" (v. 20). Nephi chose to not join in but, rather, immediately began to build a hunting bow, which was another marvel. As mentioned earlier, Hugh Nibley gives it as his opinion that the finding of bow-wood was "something of a miracle." Then Nibley makes the startling claim that it was "almost as great a feat for Nephi to make a [lethal] bow as it was for him to build a ship."[115] The replacement bow obviously could not just be a bent branch with a string

112. Freya Stark, *A Winter in Arabia: A Journey Through Yemen* (New York: Overlook Press, 1940), 295.

113. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 48.

114. Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 32.

115. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 61.

of animal gut. That doesn't necessarily mean that it took a long time; Nephi didn't have a long time. The families were in danger of starving. It took, perhaps, as little as one week to find the right branch, cure the green wood, shape the bow, and make arrows to fit that new hunting bow.[116]

During that week, Nephi "did speak much unto my brethren" (v. 22), and by the time he was ready to hunt, "they had humbled themselves because of my words" (v. 24). This means the repentance process did not take additional time. Lehi, the priesthood authority who had shockingly joined in the murmuring, was sufficiently "chastened because of his murmuring against the Lord" (v. 25) to still be able to receive revelation through the Liahona as to where Nephi should go (v. 30). Again, this didn't need to take a long time; Jehovah is "quick to hear the cries of his people and to answer their prayers" (Alma 9:26). When Nephi returned with "beasts [plural] which I had slain," they did further "humble themselves before the Lord, and did give thanks unto him," probably in the form of another animal sacrifice (1 Nephi 16: 32).

As explained just above, in determining the time spent at the Camp of the Broken Bow, we can look again at the words "the space of a time" (v. 17). If the 830 miles from Shazer to the Camp of the Broken Bow took the "space of many days" (40 to 60 days or around two months), then the "the space of a time" at the Camp of the Broken Bow was likely comparable: a little over two months.

To be fair, when Aston, an expert on the trip through Arabia, speculates to fill in some of the "missing years," he is valiantly trying to resolve the problem of the traditional view. He writes: "As their time in the wilderness occupied eight years, [which was] a distance usually covered by trade caravans in around a hundred travel days, clearly some extended stops must have been made where crops could be grown."[117] Therefore, it "seems likely to have been a place where crops could be grown … and it would be some time before crops could be harvested."[118] Unfortunately, for his speculation to fill the time, growing more crops at the Camp of the Broken Bow (or Shazer, or Nahom, or Bountiful) is nowhere indicated by Nephi. Further, it begs the question of where they acquired seeds to grow crops (since all experts, including Aston, agree that they didn't use the seeds they were bringing from Jerusalem).

116. The detail of Nephi having to make new arrows in order to match a lighter, wooden bow was made by Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 49.

117. Ibid., 51.

118. Ibid., 48.

Finally, it requires that nothing worthy of adding to the Small Plates happened in an entire growing season, and that seems unlikely. This idea of growing crops at the Camp of the Broken Bow is even less likely than the speculation of growing crops in the Valley of Lemuel. They were at someone else's oasis, and in Arabia a water oasis would be "owned by tribes who guarded them closely."[119] The Lehites couldn't just move in and start growing crops. Further, and as also mentioned earlier, there is nothing in the text to support the conjecture that any seeds were grown in any location other than the "land of Jerusalem." Plus, there is no hint that the Lehites stayed in the Camp of the Broken Bow anywhere near that long. That conjecture is an understandable attempt to support the traditional reading of 1 Nephi 17:45 but is not supported by the text. I estimate that they were at the Camp of the Broken Bow for, at most, two months.

Travel to the Land of Nahom (NHM)

Following those two months, they did "again take our journey, traveling … for the *space of many days*" (1 Nephi 16: 33), or perhaps a couple more months of travel. This seems reasonable based on the distances involved. The distance from the Camp of the Broken Bow to the Nahom area was approximately another 425 miles. That distance was somewhat less than the two-month travel from Shazer to the Camp of the Broken Bow, which was 830 miles. Assuming the same average speed of 13 miles per day, the "space of many days" from the Camp of the Broken Bow to Nahom (425 miles) would be 33 days, or just over one month.

Time Spent in the Land of Nahom

Nephi records that "We did pitch our tents again, that we might tarry for the space of a time" (1 Nephi 16:33). Now, though, there was a new upset. "And it came to pass that Ishmael died, and *was buried* in the place which was called Nahom" (v. 34). This would have thrown the entire camp into turmoil. Ishmael was Lehi's best friend and possibly a cousin. And it hit everyone hard, especially Ishmael's daughters, and likely his sons. Grief at his death resulted in the daughters rebelling "against my father, and also against me" (vv. 35–36). Although Nephi gives the reason for the rebellion as grief and mourning, more was going on. For one thing, their grief was exacerbating by the fact that "they have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue" (v. 35). For another, not only was

119. Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 27.

their father dead, but they knew that "the one thing expressed most clearly by Israelite burial practices is the … desire … [for] burial in one's native land at least, and if possible, with one's ancestors. 'Bury me with my fathers,' Jacob's request (Gen 49:29), was the wish of every ancient Israelite."[120] Ishmael was going to be denied this custom. Even worse, his body was soon to be left behind as the Lehites moved on. Perhaps that explains why the daughters of Ishmael "were desirous to return again to Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 16:36). They may have had the vain hope of somehow getting his body, and likely themselves, back to his ancestral home.

There may have been even more than that going on. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland compares this situation with the sin of Lot's wife. It was not just that Lot's wife looked back, but that

> in her heart she wanted to *go* back. … She was already missing what Sodom and Gomorrah had offered her. As Elder Maxwell once said, such people know they should have their primary residence in Zion, but they still hope to keep a summer cottage in Babylon. … We certainly know that Laman and Lemuel were resentful when Lehi and his family were commanded to leave Jerusalem. So it isn't just that she looked back; she looked back longingly.[121]

It was perhaps that the "looking back longingly" was an understandable part of a grief process that allowed the daughters to avoid the same punishment that was given to Lot's wife. The consequence was not salt, but lack of food. "We must perish in the wilderness with hunger" (1 Nephi 16:35).

Whether Laman was a part of the daughters' initial murmuring, or he simply capitalized on it, he was soon on board with them. He had put his hand to the plow; but his own desire to "look back" and return to corrupt Jerusalem marked him as unfit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62). Sadly, some of today's Church members are also "looking back" and leaving the Church over exaggerated social issues and the misreadings of historical events. Hopefully, like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17–19), many

120. Charles M. Chafer and Cynthia S. Price, s.v. "Burial — in the Bible," Encyclopedia.com, updated, May 21, 2018, https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/anthropology-and-archaeology/customs-and-artifacts/burial.

121. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Remember Lot's Wife," *BYU Speeches*, January 13, 2009, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/remember-lots-wife/.

will come to realize how much better it really is to be close to the Father and return to the Church.[122]

How long the daughters' resentment festered before it burst out into the open is not clear. What is clear is that Laman took the rebellion a major step forward when he approached Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael and "did … stir up their hearts to anger" (1 Nephi 16:38). He even suggested a horrendous and impulsive idea: "Behold, let us slay our father, and also our brother Nephi" (v. 37). Whether that idea was related to Deuteronomist claims or not, patricide and fratricide were unforgivable, and Laman was on the brink. This time, Lehi and Nephi could not defuse the situation alone; it wasn't until "the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words unto them" (v. 39) that "they did turn away their anger, and did repent of their sins" (v. 39). We must conclude that their repentance was sincere, since "the Lord did bless us again with food, that we did not perish" (v. 39).

The crisis of food, and its solution, are very important details. The timeframe of the crisis (the "space of a time") appears to be fairly short, if for no other reason than because it was tied to the lack of food. It could not have taken months of rebellion and months of repentance, or the family would have starved to death. It had to have been an intense and impulsive flare-up that quickly dissipated, probably less than a week. The problem was resolved by the Lord, following the repentance. This not to say that the Lehites didn't stay in Nahom; we can be sure they did. But the question, again, is how long they were there. In another attempt to explain the missing years of the traditional interpretation, we encounter another speculative theory.

Speculation 3: The Lehites Sold Themselves into Slavery

S. Kent Brown was well aware of the dilemma caused by the traditional reading of 1 Nephi 17:4–5. He notes that "the period [of eight years] is far too long even for a cautious crossing of the Arabian desert."[123] To reconcile that problem, he proposes

> the possibility, even likelihood, that family members had to come under the domination of desert tribesmen either for protection or for food. … Scattered clues hint that family members lived in a dependent or servile relationship to desert

122. I am indebted to Dean Bjornestad for the comparisons with Lot's wife and the Prodigal Son.

123. Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 58.

> peoples. … In sum, it seems reasonable that the years spent by Lehi and his family in crossing the desert were characterized by the not uncommon practice "in times of scarcity" of "the bargaining away of freedom — or part of it — in return for food."[124]

As evidence for this startling suggestion, Brown points to a comment by Alma: "Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day. … ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity" (Alma 36:29).

However, Alma's comment, made hundreds of years later, may have been a reference to the much later bondage of Limhi's people and Alma's people to the Lamanites (Mosiah 27:16; Alma 16:3). It might also be a warning of a recurring pattern ("from time to time even down to the present day" (Alma 36:28) and refer to captivity in *spiritual* bondage. We must all "retain in remembrance" the danger of being "taken captive by the devil" (Alma 12:11), who "flattereth away … until he grasps them [us] with his awful chains" (2 Nephi 28:22). It is unlikely that Alma is referring here to the Lehites' time in Nahom, since literal slavery usually meant bondage for a long period of time, if not for a lifetime. Plus, Nephi and later prophets compared the trek through Arabia to the exodus of Moses. If slavery in Nahom, and subsequent deliverance, had occurred, that would seem like low-hanging fruit for such a comparison. If the entire party, including women and children, had been enslaved, why would there be silence from Nephi and only a few "scattered clues" over hundreds of years of prophetic writing? It is telling that $Nephi_2$, the son of Helaman, envied the times of $Nephi_1$ as golden years. He writes: "Oh, that I could have had my days in the days when my father Nephi first came out of the land of Jerusalem. … Yea, if my days could have been in those days, then would my soul have had joy in the righteousness of my brethren. But behold, I am consigned that these are my days" (Helaman 7:7–9).

A second evidence that Brown offers concerns the word *sojourn,* used in 1 Nephi 17:3. Brown writes, "In the Bible, the term *to sojourn* regularly refers to servile relationships."[125] However, the verb *to sojourn* (לָגוּר, *lagur*; Strong's H1481) actually means "to abide, dwell in, dwell with, remain,

124. Ibid, 55–56.
125. Brown, "Refining the Spotlight," 50.

inhabit, be a stranger" and "to turn aside from the road (for a lodging or any other purpose)."[126] The Lehites were "sojourners" at all their stops, including in Bountiful. According to Loren Spendlove, *lagur* "is rarely associated with any type of forced servitude."[127] In fact, the Hebrew Bible explicitly *excludes* the idea of servitude for sojourners.[128] The *Torah* instead mandates hospitality to sojourning strangers (for example, Exodus 22:21, 23:9, Leviticus 19:33, Deuteronomy 10:19). Besides, selling oneself into slavery is not a brief process, as Brown acknowledges: "In the worst of cases, one becomes the slave or property of another so that one's freedom has to be wrested by purchase or by escape."[129] If either slavery or deliverance were the case, how is it possible that Nephi missed this golden opportunity to emphasize the testimony-building deliverance by the power of the Lord? Yet there is not a word about it.

Another problem regards the seeds and the camels. If the Lehites had been taken into bondage, why would those who seized them not also seize their property? Their abundant grain and their camels would be valuable property, right there for the taking, an obvious extension of capturing people. Yet, Nephi's account in 1 Nephi 18:6 explicitly states that they still had their heavy tents, and "*all* our loading and our seeds" when they boarded the ship for the New World. This is confirmed in the promised land when they "did pitch our tents" and "did put *all* our seeds into the earth" (1 Nephi 18:23). Why did their purported captors fail to seize their valuable property? Further, Nephi is clear that the problem of starvation was resolved by the Lord, not by them. The solution was repentance, not slavery (1 Nephi 16:39). Chadwick writes, "Rather than bondage, the bitterness and suffering that caused Lehi so much sorrow seem in every case directly attributable to the wicked and violent actions of his older sons Laman and Lemuel."[130]

Even putting aside speculation 3, we are not finished with attempts to fill in the missing years. Warren Aston again raises the possibility that the Lehites took the time to grow and harvest food in Nahom: "Nephi's account … suggests that Lehi's group intended remaining in

126. *Blue Letter Bible*, https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1481/kjv/wlc/0-1/.

127. Loren Spendlove, email correspondence to Godfrey Ellis, 23 October 2022.

128. The Encyclopedia of the Bible defines sojourner as, simply, a "stranger," BibleGateway, *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "sojourner," https://web.archive.org/web/20201125150729/https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Sojourner.

129. Brown, "Refining the Spotlight," 50.

130. Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," 75.

this region long enough to grow and harvest crops."[131] There is no textual support for that conjecture. I am sympathetic with the need to account for the missing years required by the traditional reading, but this last speculation seems unlikely. For one thing, where did they get the seeds to plant crops at every major stopping point? They certainly didn't use the sacred seeds that were intended for the New World. They would rather starve than use those seeds, as Aston points out: "It is a testament to the faith of Lehi and Sariah that the seeds they were carrying were not used to alleviate their needs."[132]

A More Likely Estimate of Time in Nahom

Still, several events occurred in Nahom, and we must consider them. Nephi writes that they were there for the "space of a time" (1 Nephi 16:33), which seems more than a few weeks. The events had to have taken up to a month or two, but no more. I have earlier demonstrated by logic, by scripture, and by mileage calculation that the "space of a time" (1 Nephi 16:33) was only a few months. If they had remained in Nahom for six, seven or eight years, Nephi would have told us that. He didn't. Nephi writes nothing to support the idea that the space of a time was several years. What the text says is that there was a rebellion, and they subsequently suffered loss of food. They did not solve this problem by themselves through slavery or by growing crops; the Lord solved it after their repentance (v. 39). In fact, *in the very next verse*, immediately following their repentance, Nephi announces that "we did again take our journey in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 17:1). Where do years of servitude or years of growing crops fit into that scenario?

Let's put aside the demands to fill in missing time that are created by the traditional reading of "eight years in the wilderness" and rely only on logic and the text. The "space of a time" (1 Nephi 16:33) again suggests several months and, indeed, the events in Nahom sound as if they would have taken that much time. There was the death and burial of Ishmael, the need to replenish provisions for the final leg of the trip, the festering of the rebellion against Lehi and Nephi, an acute flare-up, including the threat of murder, and what must have been speedy repentance that resulted in the restoring of food. Several months sounds accurate; several years does not. We can generously allow *two and a half months* for their "space of a time" in Nahom.

131. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 71.
132. Ibid, 49.

Travel to the Entrance to Bountiful (Wadi Sayq)

The final leg of the journey was unquestionably the most difficult and brutal. Nephi makes that point crystal clear. Another traveler in Arabia in 1876 also describes the cruelty of an Arabian desert crossing:

> The summer's night at end, the sun stands up as a crown of hostile flames. … The desert day dawns not little by little, but it is noontide in an hour. The sun, entering as a tyrant upon the waste landscape, darts upon us a torment of fiery beams, not to be remitted till the far-off evening. … Grave is that giddy heat upon the crown of the head … in the glassiness of this sun-stricken nature: the hot sand-blink is in the eyes.[133]

This horrendous part of the trek extended approximately 700 more miserable miles from Nahom past Ma'rib, which is widely accepted as the ancient home of the Queen of Sheba.[134] Their Liahona-inspired path miraculously skirted the deadliest section of the dreaded Empty Quarter to the north and the Ramlat Saba'tayn desert to the south. This perfect direction, which threads a needle, again shows evidence of divine guidance via the Liahona. In Jeff Lindsay's, words, "Incredibly, following Nephi's directions … this path will allow you to have a shot at survival."[135] If they traveled at the "usual" speed of 13 miles per day, that would mean 54 days — or more likely 54 nights. In other words, it may have taken just under *two months* to travel from Nahom to the entrance to Bountiful.

Total Time for the Entire Journey (Jerusalem to Bountiful)

With the estimates given above, it is now possible to calculate the total time of the entire journey to the entrance to Bountiful without the constraints of the traditional interpretation. Table 2 reviews what has been discussed to this point, while balancing realistic estimates and still being as generous as possible.

133. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Desert*, 102–103.

134. Warren Aston, "Finding the First Verifiable Book of Mormon Site," (Part 1, 2014), https://ldsmag.com/article-1-14168/. See, also, Habeeb Salloum, "Ma'rib — A Journey to the Queen of Sheba's City," *Arab America*, October 11, 2022, www.arabamerica.com/marib-a-journey-to-the-queen-of-shebas-city.

135. Lindsay, "Joseph and Dream Map: Part 1," 186.

Table 2. Major Activities/Journeys — Jerusalem to Bountiful.

Activity/Journey	Time Allowance
Time to Get out of Jerusalem	Perhaps half a month
Travel From Jerusalem to the Valley of Lemuel	Half a month
Time in the Valley of Lemuel	Twelve months
Time at the Oasis of Shazer	One month
Travel to the Camp of the Broken Bow at Bisha	Just over two months
Time in the Camp of the Broken Bow	Two months
Travel to the Land of Nahom (NHM)	One and a half months
Time in the Land of Nahom	Two and half months
Travel to the Entrance to Bountiful (Wadi Sayq)	Just under two months

The grand total of the entire journey, from Jerusalem to the entrance to Bountiful, would appear to be two years, not eight years, and that is being quite generous in estimating the time spent at the four stops.

But there is more. In the traditional reading, there has been no clearly marked ending for the group to remain in Bountiful itself. With the alternate reading of Nephi's *wilderness*, including Bountiful, an ending time becomes apparent. It is now plausible that they spent eight years total in the Arabian Peninsula, meaning that they must have been in Bountiful for six years. This is consistent with Jeffrey R. Chadwick's suggestion: "I strongly suspect that as much as six of the eight years in the wilderness was actually time spent at Bountiful."[136]

What is not clear is how much of those six years was spent actually building the ship, compared to other activities that most people fail to take into account. They did not enter the oasis lagoon and immediately begin building a ship. Clearly, it must have taken time for Nephi, having no tools initially and no shipbuilding experience, to even prepare to build a large and seaworthy ocean-going ship. All scholars estimate that the ship-building project would have taken multiple years — but how many of the six years? The full six years could not have been spent just assembling the ship. That would ignore significant preparatory and logistical activities. What else did they do in Bountiful? I am unaware of any other scholar's attempt to account for all their activities, other than the building of the ship. There are other support activities to consider when accounting for their six years in Bountiful.

136. Ibid.

An Estimate of Timing and Activities in Bountiful

The building of the ship was the crown jewel of the time in Bountiful. With the aid of reluctant assistants and the Lord's help "from time to time" (1 Nephi 18:1), Nephi was able to construct a large and seaworthy vessel. This ship was capable of transporting a large group of people and a huge cargo across some 16,000 miles of ocean. There are many competing ideas of what this ship may have been like. Aston suggests that it could even have been an elaborate raft but adds, "I actually favor a mortise and tenon timber ship."[137] Potter opposes the idea of a raft[138] and speculates that Nephi could have "learned how" to construct such a ship by observing, and roughly copying, vessels being constructed in Khor Rori. He suggests that "Nephi needed access to the best shipwrights of his day"[139] and that Khor Rori was the one location "where Nephi could learn how to construct … his ship … from master shipwrights."[140] He suggests that the final product, "with the exception of an added deck, was rather conventional for the period."[141]

Others focus on 1 Nephi 18:2, where Nephi specifically tells us that "I, Nephi, did *not* work the timbers after the manner which was *learned by men* … [but] did build it after the manner which the Lord had shown unto me" (1 Nephi 18:2). They read that the "workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine" (v. 4) and imagine a ship that was not at all conventional. McConkie and Millet, for example, movingly write, "The sweat and tears shed in the building of the ship were a sacrament, for the building of the ship was a form of worship and an act of faith."[142] Newell Wright shares his opinion that "the ship becomes a symbol of Christ: 'And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Thou shalt construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee, that *I may carry* thy people across these waters.' Christ equated the ship with himself."[143] One sure thing seems to be that this vessel could not have been thrown together in haste. It was a unique and miraculous vessel. Nephi humbly but clearly states that "after I had finished the ship, according to the word of the

137. Aston, "Nephi's Bountiful," 243–44 and Aston, "Across Arabia," 22–23.
138. Potter, "Khor Rori," 256–57.
139. Ibid., 277.
140. Ibid., 284, 268.
141. Ibid., 255.
142. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1, First and Second Nephi (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 140.
143. Newell Wright, email correspondence to Godfrey Ellis, December 27, 2022.

Lord, my brethren beheld that it was good" — so much so that it caused Laman and Lemuel to "humble themselves again before the Lord" (18:4). What a reversal, because Laman and Lemuel were the "brethren" who, at the beginning, began to "Murmur against me, saying: Our brother is a fool, for he thinketh that he can build a ship; yea, and he also thinketh that he can cross these great waters. And thus my brethren … did not believe that I could build a ship; neither would they believe that I was instructed of the Lord" (1 Nephi 17:17–18).

To build a vessel like that would have required a significant amount of time — but how much time? The length of time the Lehites spent in Bountiful is not mentioned by Nephi, not even in an account that is otherwise rich with details. However, it would be a gross error to assume that the total time in Bountiful was taken up by just the building (i.e., assembling) of the vessel, no matter how impressive that was. Other significant events and a great deal of preparation are not usually considered. The preparation work included miraculous accomplishments that, without the help of the Lord, would have been impossible. Those other major accomplishments should not be glossed over. For Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and presumably some of the wives, these events constituted stumbling blocks; for Lehi, Sariah, Nephi, Sam, and presumably others of the wives, they were opportunities to trust and lean on the Lord.

Setting up Camp and Securing the Labor of Laman and Lemuel

Let's consider what might have gone into Nephi's incredible accomplishments in the preparation period for the assembling (the actual building) of the vessel. The ship project was not started immediately; that is clear. The voice of the Lord did not come to Nephi for "the space of many days" (1 Nephi 17:7). That timeframe, as discussed earlier, would seem to mean that it was several months before he received the news that he was to build a ship. The Lehites were not idle during those several months.

First, they had to set up their tents again, most likely on the western bluff or plateau, to avoid any risk of monsoon flash floods or taking up valley space needed for the massive project to come. They likely also had to arrange one or more of the natural caves and hollows at the cliff edges for long-term kitchens, lumber storage/drying areas, and for additional sleeping areas, thus saving at least some of the tent fabrics (modified, of course) to later use as sails for the ship. That all took time.

Second, they had to "stock the cupboards." They needed to hunt immediately to build up a store of meat as well as fish from the edge of the Indian Ocean. Bountiful fruit and honey gathered naturally around the lagoon were well and good, but the human body also requires protein to supplement that diet. Aston points out that "the plentiful sea life all along the coast likely holds the key to understanding how Lehi's group with its limited manpower could derive enough protein from their environment. … Fish not proscribed by Mosaic Law likely formed a large part of the Lehites' diet once they lived at Bountiful."[144] So they needed to hunt for kosher game. Aston tells us definitively that there was bountiful wildlife in Bountiful (discussed below), and one can easily imagine that they had a celebration banquet and offered thanks sacrifices not long after their arrival. How delicious that fresh meat would have been to them! They also continued to make jerky, for Nephi tells us that they had a store of "meat from the wilderness" to take "down into the ship" at their departure (1 Nephi 18:6). The fruit was easy enough to gather, and some of the honeycombs were available in the same trees, though to preserve such stores required a learning curve. Brent Heaton describes how honey could be taken from the trees without being stung, but that was a technique that had to be learned. Other honeycombs were hanging from the cliff walls.[145] They would have either had to climb up[146] or rappel down from the cliff tops,[147] and that would have taken time to learn how to do.

Third, they most likely would have constructed, at a minimum, a stone altar or worship area, just as they had built an altar upon first arriving in the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 2:7). There is credible speculation that they may have constructed a "worship sanctuary" in the same dimensions and with the same features as Solomon's temple

144. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 137.

145. A fascinating description of safely taking honey from the honeycombs in the trees of Khor Kharfot is reported in Brent Heaton, "What Life is Like Today at Nephi's Bountiful," *Meridian Magazine* (July 12, 2018), https://latterdaysaintmag.com/what-life-is-like-today-at-nephis-bountiful/.

146. See text and photographs for similar activity in "How Nepal's Cliff Honey Hunters are Risking Their Lives," *Aljazeera*, www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/12/14/in-pictures-nepal-cliff-honey-hunters-mountains.

147. See a fascinating photo-essay by Alan Taylor, "Honey Hunting on the Cliffs of China's Yunnan Province," *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2019/06/honey-hunting-chinas-yunnan-province-photos/591202/.

in Jerusalem.[148] This would be consistent with the Nephites building a temple "after the manner of the temple of Solomon," in the New World (2 Nephi 5:16). Warren Aston and his son Chad discovered stone ruins that could have been "some kind of ceremonial place."[149] However, Aston has suggested caution regarding dating stone remains.[150] Certainly, though, Lehi and Nephi would have constructed some kind of worship area or at least a relatively permanent stone altar. That would also have taken time.

Fourth, other basic needs would have had to be arranged. Those included at least health and illness needs, sanitation needs, and repairing, or likely replacing, clothing. The only animals large enough for leather garments were either camel hides or the hides of the Arabian leopards and the wolves that occasionally hunted in the lagoon.[151] Such animals would have yielded hides, but those hides had to be cleaned and processed. That would have represented another learning curve that took time. The children's spiritual education also had to be arranged.

Time to do such things is rarely considered but could have been considerable. We do not know exactly how much time such activities would have taken. Some items would have been ongoing, but others were immediate needs. All the record says is that "after I, Nephi, had been in the land of Bountiful *for the space of many days*, the voice of the Lord came unto me, saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain" (1 Nephi 17:7). The question of what "the space of many days" means was addressed earlier in the paper. If the "space of many days" suggests approximately two months, this preparatory work prior to Nephi's receiving the new theophany would have taken somewhere around *two months*.

At Nephi's theophany, the Lord provided the stunning news that Nephi was to build a seaworthy vessel that would be able to carry provisions for a large group of adults and children,[152] plus the new tools,

148. See Scott and Maurine Proctor, "Nephi's Bountiful: Archaeological Dig: Was There a Holy Place of Worship at Nephi's Bountiful?," *Meridian Magazine* (February 29, 2016), https://ldsmag.com/day-2-was-there-a-holy-place-of-worship-at-nephis-bountiful.

149. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 143.

150. Warren Aston, "A Research Note: Continuing Exploration and Research in Oman," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 261, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-research-note-continuing-exploration-and-research-in-oman/.

151. Aston and Aston, "In the Footsteps of Lehi," 67–68. Also see Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 153.

152. Wellington and Potter cite other authors who speculate that the number of people was 43, 68, or even 73 people. See Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 38.

the large amount of varying seeds, and enough remaining large travel tents to "pitch our tents … [in the] Promised Land" (1 Nephi 18:23). Keep in mind that this vessel was to be handmade, using homemade tools to fell and mill what would have to have been a very large number of trees. Little wonder that his brothers murmured, "Our brother is a fool" (1 Nephi 17:17) and "did not believe that I could build a ship; neither would they believe that I was instructed of the Lord" (v. 18).

Their skepticism prompted another long admonition by Nephi which compared their situation to that of the children of Israel under Moses. The comparison implied that Nephi was a Moses figure, which could not have gone down well with Laman and Lemuel. Nephi then punctuated the sermon by saying that Laman and Lemuel were "murderers in your hearts" (1 Nephi 17:44) and that he feared "lest ye shall be cast off forever" (v. 47). Laman and Lemuel flew into an instant and murderous rage, which was stopped by the dramatic threat that, if they touched him, they would "wither even as a dried reed" (v. 48).

Although Laman and Lemuel doubted that their younger brother could build a ship, they clearly did not doubt his warning and backed off significantly. It is important to notice that there was a long "cooling off" period for Laman and Lemuel, and presumably the sons of Ishmael as well. We don't know what was going on during that period of time. We are told in verse 16 that Nephi was already making the tools for building the ship, the activity that had drawn Laman and Lemuel's mockery. Laman and his followers would have had much to think about as these activities were going on, but what they were doing, we do not know. Nephi does tell us that during this time, they "were confounded and could not contend against me; neither durst they lay their hands upon me nor touch me with their fingers, even for *the space of many days*" (v. 52). We've already seen that when Nephi writes that something took the "space of many days" (v. 52), that appears to mean another two months or so. After these apparently two months, the Lord instructed Nephi to "shock" his brothers, and "the Lord did shake them" (v. 54) into compliance, and Nephi secured their willingness to provide labor, apparently for several years (1 Nephi 18:1).

Those two sets of activities occurred back-to-back. The first time period comprised the time to set up their tents, recuperate, hunt, and settle in before receiving the Lord's directive to build the ship. The second time period was the calming down of Laman and Lemuel, and the time when they could not touch him.

The "Bountiful Blacksmith Shop"

When the Lord first commanded the construction of the ship (1 Nephi 17:8), a stunned Nephi could only ask the Lord: "Wither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship?" (v. 9). Having received the answer to that question, he then had to gather, or mine, the ore. A casual reading of the text estimates that as a few-days job and trivial detail. Not so. The gathering or mining of the ore and the flint to make fire every day, the hand-construction of a working and reliable bellows made out of animal hides, and the subsequent smelting of the ore (v. 11) meant, in effect, creating a serious, working "blacksmith shop" right there in the inlet. Then Nephi had to hand-forge metal tools. Significantly, his first question was not, "Where can I find *tools*?" but "Whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may *make* tools" (v. 9). He apparently already knew how to make tools that were capable of standing up to constant use in heavy construction over several years. Nephi had confidence that, given the right raw materials, he would be able to do so. Tvedtnes makes the point that "when the Lord told Nephi … to build a ship, he had to give detailed instructions on how to do it. … but there is no record that Nephi had to ask how to prepare the metal tools." This further supports the idea that Nephi had been trained as a metalworker.[153] This initial accomplishment should not be glossed over, although it usually is.

Consider, also, that making just one set of tools would have been woefully inadequate. There had to be enough tools for Nephi's entire labor force. Though that was small, it still included seven healthy young men: Laman, Lemuel, Sam, Nephi, Zoram, and the two sons of Ishmael. Jacob was too young to be much more than possibly a messenger-boy. If Joseph had been born in the trek from Nahom, he would still be just a toddler. If he had been born in Bountiful, as Chadwick believes, he would have still been a baby. Chadwick supplies evidence for his supposition.[154] The

153. See Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 94.

154. Joseph being born in Bountiful could fit the alternative interpretation. Also, Nephi reported that during the tempest at sea, "Jacob and Joseph also, being young, having need of much nourishment, were grieved because of the afflictions of their mother" (1 Nephi 18:19). Chadwick takes this to mean that "at least one of them, logically Joseph, had not yet been weaned by the time the party had set sail and still needed the nourishment of his mother's milk, which Sariah was unable to give because of her illness" (Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," 75). True, Lehi later tells Joseph, "Thou wast born in the wilderness of mine afflictions; yea, in the days of my greatest sorrow" (2 Nephi 3:1). However, *afflictions* and *sorrow* may refer to chronic, life-threatening ill health, not the physical hardship of a desert.

young wives and Lehi's wife, Sariah, would likely have helped out in any way that they could. However, they may have been fully occupied with childcare, cooking, and taking care of clothing. Near the latter part of the group's stay in Bountiful, the women would have had to modify some of the tent fabrics for use as sails, since the account is clear that the ship moved by wind power, not just by ocean currents (18:8).

There is no mention of Ishmael's wife. Somewhat surprisingly, she was not mentioned as mourning Ishmael's death, so she, like Ishmael, may have died during the trek. As for Lehi, the text does not record his functioning in the role of family patriarch during these years, although he did receive the revelation of when to go down into the ship to depart (1 Nephi 18:5). He would later give final patriarchal blessings on arrival in the New World. There are various reasons for his inactivity, but one possibility is that he may have been severely ill and therefore unavailable. Circumstantial evidence for this speculation is his absence in what most scholars call "Nephi's Bountiful" not "Lehi's Bountiful," his life-threatening illness during the sea voyage (vv. 17–18), Nephi's report that he was "stricken in years" (18:17), and the immediacy of his death in the New Word. He appears to have given the blessings soon after arriving, prior to which he stated, "a *few more days* and I go the way of all the earth" (2 Nephi 4:12). Then again, he may have been managing the day-to-day affairs of the camp in the background. In any case, he does not appear to have been available for hard labor.

Nephi, then, had at least six strong and healthy fellow laborers,[155] and undoubtedly some additional help from the women. Even so, Nephi quite appropriately refers to the building of the ship as his achievement. At the completion of that monumental task, he says, "after I [not "we"

Supporting the speculation that the boys were born in Bountiful, not the desert, is that they were not mentioned when Nephi reports their trials between Nahom and Bountiful. The verse in 1 Nephi 17:1 states that "our women did bear children in the wilderness," but it is not clear that that included Sariah. Indeed, one would think Nephi would have mentioned the birth of new brothers when that event took place, not years later. Then too, Laman and Lemuel seem to claim in 1 Nephi 17:20 that the children born back in verse 1 were from "our women" as their own children, not from their mother as their new brothers. Nephi does not introduce Jacob and Joseph until years later at the end of Bountiful after everyone boarded the ship (1 Nephi 18:6). At that time, Nephi adds, "my father begat two sons in the wilderness," but that "wilderness" could well have been the wilderness of Bountiful.

155. Newell Wright suggests that Lehi, and probably Ishmael, could have taken unnamed servants with them from Jerusalem. That may well have been the case, but there is no textual support for that speculation (email correspondence to Godfrey Ellis, December 27, 2022).

but "I"] had finished the ship, according to the word of the Lord, my brethren beheld that it was good" (1 Nephi 18:4). That identification is an accurate description, for he was surely the planner, foreman, manager, and supervisor for the blacksmith projects (as well as the ship project discussed below). The others were simply helpers and laborers.

Still, they all needed tools. Although there could have been a limited amount of sharing among the workers, one set of tools wouldn't have "cut it." The production of all of the sets of tools appears to have been the work of Nephi alone, because only he had metalworking skills. Several scholars have speculated that Nephi was trained as a fine whitesmith (or goldsmith).[156] It comes as somewhat of a surprise that he could also function as a blacksmith. The difference is that whitesmiths manipulate lighter metals, adding finishing touches through filing, carving, and polishing, while blacksmiths use raw iron to make large and sometimes crude products.[157] Nephi apparently could do both, since he was also able to forge scrapers for hides, wood planes, heavy hammers, mauls, axes, and saws.

Nor was this a one-and-done activity. Even if they had used power tools, which they obviously did not have, the vessel may have taken over a year to build. It would at least triple the time to accomplish the same thing using only their homemade hand tools. And making the tools was not the only function of the "Bountiful Blacksmith Shop."[158] Wellington and Potter argue that "Nephi needed hardwood to build a ship strong enough to survive an ocean crossing." As any woodworker knows, there is a major difference between hand-working softwoods and hand-working hardwoods; it is an entirely different proposition. Not only are hardwoods hard — making them difficult to cut, shape, and

156. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*; Aston, "Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah"; and Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia* all make this point and seem to base that speculation on (1) his initial interruption in the narrative in order to admire the "exceedingly fine" metal work of Laban's sword (1 Nephi 4:9), (2) his interest in the "fine brass" of the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10), (3) his ownership of "my bow, which was made of fine steel" (1 Nephi 16:18), and (4) his ability to fabricate ultra-thin metal plates to engrave his long record (1 Nephi 19:1). He was clearly a connoisseur of fine metal workmanship.

157. For the difference between a whitesmith and a blacksmith, see "Blacksmith vs. Whitesmith — What's the Difference?" *Working the Flame* (December 20, 2019), https://workingtheflame.com/blacksmith-vs-whitesmith/#:~:text=Whitesmithing%20got%20its%20name%20from,detail%20in%20the%20next%20section.

158. Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 38.

smooth — they also dull the tool-cutting blades very quickly. Therefore, sharpening and even replacing broken tools was an on-going need.

We don't know, of course, how fast Nephi could have set up his "blacksmith shop," mined the ore, built the bellows, smelted the iron, carved and attached the wooden handles for multiple sets of tools. However, it sounds as if it would have taken considerable time. These significant accomplishments and the timing of them should not be glossed over, although readers don't usually consider any of this. It seems as if the time for the blacksmith-related activities had to have been in the order of six months or so.

The "Bountiful Sawmill and Lumber Yard"

After that came the lumber problem. Here, the other workers could help Nephi, at least to some degree. The question of timber and the resulting lumber has been, and continues to be, a sticking point among the various scholars. They are conflicted as to whether there were appropriate trees in sufficient quantities in either Khor Kharfot or Khor Rori to build a ship. Potter makes a startling claim: "If good shipbuilding timber never grew in Oman, then Nephi must have used, like the Arab shipwrights, imported materials from India and the islands thereabout."[159] Wellington and Potter quote an Omani expert to say that "most, if not all, planking timber had to be imported."[160]

Warren Aston strongly disagrees with Potter's theory of Nephi importing already milled lumber from India; and indeed, the finances and logistics of that seem overwhelming. Aston believes that sufficient timber grew in Khor Kharfot to build a ship, using just existing trees. Judith Grimes, a botanist who visited the inlet with Aston, notes on Aston's video "Lehi in Arabia" that "most of the trees here are from 1.5 to 3 meters [5 to 10 feet] in girth and have 2 to 4 meters [6.5 to 13 feet] of solid trunk, which means there's quite a bit of harvestable wood if it was ever required for building." Then, showing the viewers one very large tree, she added, "This Tamarind tree is the largest tree in this wadi that we have found so far. It has a girth of 7 meters [23 feet]."[161]

Felling many dozens of such trees using homemade axes and primitive saws would already have been a major undertaking. But they also had to limb the branches off, which was another significant amount of work. Once stripped, the trunks and larger branches had to be

159. Potter, "Khor Rori," 274.
160. Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 38.
161. Aston, "Lehi in Arabia," timestamp 58.

dragged back to the building location, possibly with the help of camels. That still would be a time-consuming activity. Then imagine scraping off the bark, splitting the length of the trunk multiple times to create planks and beams, and then milling the "timber" into "lumber" to yield beams or rough boards, all of which would be needed in abundance for a more traditional ship, but also in smaller quantities even for a sophisticated raft.

It seems clear that, in addition to creating a serious, working "blacksmith shop" in the inlet, Nephi also had to create a serious, working "sawmill and lumber yard" in order to harvest and process lumber out of native trees. Plus, the men could not have even started the assembly and joining of the planking until they had an impressive supply of lumber already collected and right there on hand, ready to use. The building of the ship, once underway, could not have been stopped if one type of lumber ran out and the men had to go and chop down and process another tree. What might have been the time required for the logging and milling? Even at full speed and with enthusiastic workers, that had to have taken a minimum of another *six months*.

The Curing of the Green Wood

But that's not the end of the story. It is not as simple as merely cutting down the trees and splitting the trunks to create usable lumber. As one website explains:

> When a tree is first cut down and the logs are sectioned into lumber, the resulting wood is considered "green" because it still has a considerable moisture content. … Green lumber can contain upwards of 130 percent [of the moisture expected for that kind of wood]; cured lumber can have between 7 and 20 percent moisture. … It's important to realize that curing green lumber can *take years* if the curing practice isn't expedited using a [very large] wood-kiln or an alternative method of drying. Air-drying lumber typically takes *one year per inch* of wood thickness. The first step in curing green lumber… is identifying an appropriate location for the process. … Otherwise it may reabsorb the moisture it is trying to release. Aside from being dry, the area should also have circulating air to help the drying process along. To avoid distortion, a few pieces of dunnage or stickers (small pieces of wood) can

> be placed between layers of lumber. … Let the wood sit for as many years as its thickness indicates.[162]

Given tenuous family relationships and the ever-aging of the seeds, this would be a particularly serious problem — especially if one interprets Nephi's comment in 1 Nephi 17:4–5 in the traditional fashion. Eight years would already have been used up just getting to Bountiful. In addition to settling in, making metal tools, cutting down many dozen trees, all of which would have taken considerable time, we now must add another one to two years to properly stack the timbers for drying, probably into the indentations in the cliffs to protect from the rain and fog, and then curing the green timber. And that cannot be rushed. Unless timber is cured correctly, the wood will shrink, twist, or even worse, split. One cannot build a water-tight ship with wood that contains warps and splits. Perhaps they sped up the curing of the green wood using bonfires and laboriously hand-fanned the heat into the woodpile. But … caution! The website continues: "Care must be taken not to heat the lumber too quickly, as this can cause uneven curing or create potential flaws, such as splitting."[163]

Of course, some of the boards (for example, those used for the housing areas, railings, masts, or the storage bins) didn't require fully cured timber, because they wouldn't be in contact with the ocean water, and a twist or split wouldn't be as serious. The many planks that made up the hull are a different story. The wood had to be planed with a homemade wood plane, not only to make them smooth, but also thin enough to facilitate the drying process. If the Lehites used mortise and tenon joints, as in the Church's *Book of Mormon Videos*, they would have had to be chiseled with great accuracy. In that same Church video, the boards of the ship appear to be 8- to 10-inch-thick beams. There might have been some beams, but the hull planks would have had to be much thinner than that to have them air dry as quickly as possible, given no kiln. It's hard to imagine the planks averaging as thin as an inch and a half in thickness. If the rule-of-thumb given above is correct and it takes one year per inch of wood thickness, at 1½ inches thick, it would require at least *18 months*.

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162. "Curing Lumber," *Thomas* (website), www.thomasnet.com/articles/plant-facility-equipment/curing-lumber/, emphasis added.

163. Ibid.

The Time Required to Assemble the Ship

Table 2 reviewed the time estimates for the trek through the arid areas of Western Arabia. Table 3 reviews the estimates for the time spent in activities in Bountiful. The earlier calculated estimate for the total trek through Western Arabia, all the way from Jerusalem to Bountiful, was approximately two years, not eight years. That left roughly six years for the time in Bountiful. Of those six years in Bountiful, I have allowed a reasonable year and a half for settling in, hunting, building an altar, constructing tools, preparing a first stockpile of milled lumber, and then another 18 months for the green lumber to fire cure. That equals 34 months or just short of *three years* — and that is before even *beginning* the actual assembly of the ship. Two years getting to Bountiful and almost three years in the preparation of the materials would make almost five full years from leaving Jerusalem before the assembly of the ship could even begin. Logically, though, this still needs to be modified. Some of those activities would have overlapped. For example, Nephi could have been forging additional tools while Ishmael's sons were felling trees, or Laman and Zoram could have been splitting trunks while Sam and Lemuel milled and stacked the timber and stoked and fanned the fires to cure the green wood. That kind of overlapping would cut the time taken up in *preparation* for the building by, say, ten months, making two years of preparation for the assembly of the ship.

Adding those two more years to the two years for the trek to Bountiful would make four years before assembling the ship. Those four years would then be subtracted from Nephi's total of eight years *in Arabia*. The result is *four years* for an estimate of the time it would have taken to assemble the vessel.

Table 3. Preparation and Assembly of the Ship.

Activity	Time Allowance
Setting up Camp and arranging for needs of the group	Two months
Securing the Labor of Laman and his followers	Two months
The "Bountiful Blacksmith Shop"	Six months
The "Bountiful Sawmill and Lumber Yard"	Six months
The Curing of the Green Wood	18 months (1½ years)
Sub Total	34 months (< 3 years)
Reduced Time for Overlap of some Activities	Subtract ten months
Revised Sub Total	24 months (2 years)
Assembly of the Ship	48 months (4 years)
Total Time in Bountiful	72 months (6 years)

It is interesting to compare my figure of four years for the building (assembly) of the ship with estimates that other commentators have advanced. The lowest estimate comes from Matthew Bowen, who notes that "the Vikings, for example, could build their ships in a mere matter of months. The fact that Nephi had to press his brothers into service suggests that building the ship was a matter of urgency. They did not linger in Bountiful any longer than it took to build the ship — a process that probably would have taken *a year or less*."[164] To arrive at that low estimate, Bowen must be overlooking the other preparatory activities that had to take place in Bountiful, and that the ship had to be much larger and much more sophisticated than a Viking boat. A slightly higher estimate comes from Warren Aston, who asserts, "With the limited manpower available to Lehi's group and the need to also attend to domestic concerns at Bountiful, a likely *minimum* period required for constructing the ship is two years. It may well have taken longer."[165] David Lefevre talks about "the two or more years it took to build the ship."[166] George Potter's estimate is higher; he asserts that "the building of the ship was an enormous undertaking that spanned many years."[167] The highest, though, is that of Jeffrey Chadwick, who opines, "I strongly suspect that as much as six of the eight years in the wilderness was actually time spent at Bountiful building Nephi's ship."[168] Note, though, that Chadwick may be including the preparatory activities in Bountiful in addition to the assembly of the vessel; it logically could not have been all six of the years. In fact, I am not aware of any of the ancillary preparations being seriously considered in the extant literature, but they seem obvious enough when pointed out. The scholarly range, then, is one to six years. To that, I offer my own compromise figure of *four years*.

Conclusions — Does it Matter?

A fair question to ask of this or any article looking into scripture is whether the commentary makes any difference. I think it does. More specifically, the possible alternative interpretation of Nephi's "eight years in the wilderness" provides bookends that Book of Mormon readers haven't heretofore had. With the traditional (sequential) reading, there

164. Matthew Bowen, email correspondence to Godfrey Ellis, January 18, 2023.
165. Aston, "Across Arabia," 22.
166. David A. Lefevre, "We Did Again Take Our Journey," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2, (2006): 65.
167. Wellington and Potter, "Lehi's Trail," 37.
168. Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View, 75.

was only a beginning date. There was no ending date for when the Lehites pushed off into the Indian Ocean. If Nephi meant to say that the eight years ended as they *entered* Bountiful (the traditional reading), that leaves no closing time for Bountiful and no estimate of the time to build the ship. With the alternative reading, there is now a closing bookend: eight total years from Jerusalem to the launch into the Indian Ocean.[169] It seems plausible, and perhaps even likely, that the desert portion and the Bountiful portion, combined, made up the literal "eight years in the wilderness." With a fixed total of eight years for the entire trip, it now becomes possible to estimate more closely the timing of key events. It allows for the desert crossing to be made in a more credible two years, rather than having to lean on such unlikely speculations as alleged sluggishness, growing crops at every stop, or years spent in bondage to Arabian overlords. And it allows a more solid estimate for the otherwise unspecified ship building period in Bountiful. We can tentatively estimate that it took approximately two years of preparation and four years of assembly to build the ship.

Please don't misread this article. The take-away is not that my estimate, and that of Jeffrey Chadwick, is correct and that others are wrong and should be dismissed. Previous speculations have been offered in a valiant attempt to make the illogical seem logical. The point is that those speculations may not even have been necessary. Nephi's statement in 1 Nephi 17:4–5 may have been an appreciative aside or colophon to proclaim his gratitude to the Lord's granting them "means" such as Bountiful and to amplify his description of the entire trip. It could have been a testimony of awe, an aside that "interrupted" his narrative, similar to many other asides he offers in several other places in First Nephi. If that is correct and that "eight years in the wilderness" includes the undeveloped wilderness of Bountiful, it is no longer necessary to generate speculative apologetic theories to account for the traditional but unlikely reading of those two verses. Eight years of desert travel and the glossing over of details about the ship's construction is what has been presented in talks, books, scholarly articles, firesides, classes, videos, and casual conversations. With the clearly plausible new reading of the verses, it becomes possible to draw better estimates of the time spent at various locations and the time spent building the ship. Best of all, those conclusions no longer strain credulity.

169. As mentioned earlier, some scholars count the years as including the Valley of Lemuel, while some from the end of their stay in the Valley — although both of those arguably contradict Nephi's account.

As stated earlier, well into this project I found that Jeffrey R. Chadwick had come to the same conclusion that I had. He had written, "It seems to me that … the entire trip [to the Bountiful area] … lasted no more than two years. … Nephi's summary statement about eight years in the wilderness seems to me to include … Bountiful."[170] I was obviously thrilled to find that conclusion made by such an eminent scholar in the Church. Although I obviously agreed with and accepted Chadwick's opinion, it was unfortunate that he provided no justification for re-interpreting or glossing over Nephi's specific declaration in 1 Nephi 17:4–5. I hope I have filled that gap based on logic and reasoning. I readily admit the possibility that my estimates of the specific timing of the various parts of the trip and the construction of the ship may be incorrect and may be refined by experts in the various fields. However, that is not the point. The point is that we can now come closer to an understanding of the actual trek and its message of emerging from corruption and chaos, traveling through a period of trial and testing, to eventually arrive in our promised land, than has been offered to date. I hope that this article will initiate and encourage new commentary and further discussion regarding Lehi's and Nephi's s trip through Arabia.

Appendix A: The Viability and Lifetime of Seeds

There can be some debate about the shelf-life of seeds. Some may conclude, as I have, that it would have made a difference for Nephi and his people whether the seeds were 13 to 14 years old (traditional reading) or 8 to 9 years old (alternative reading). Others contend that even old seeds can retain at least a degree of viability over long periods of time. Everyone can agree, however, that all seeds, like any living entity, increasingly lose their viability over time and eventually die. The deciding factor is how quickly that process happens.[171]

Those who believe that 13 or 14 years would not have been a problem often point to anecdotal accounts of seeds germinating after hundreds, even thousands of years. Date palm seeds were found, they point out, in Herod the Great's summer palace at Masada. In fact, several of those seeds were successfully sprouted. One, and only one, grew into an 11-foot

170. Chadwick, "An Archeologist's View," 75.

171. There is no question that divine intervention could explain how old seeds could "grown exceedingly … in abundance." The Lord could cause beach sand to germinate into fruits and vegetables if that matched His purposes, but that is not how He usually intervenes in mortal processes. That the first planting was so successful is already something of a "tender mercy."

palm tree that was nicknamed "Methuselah."[172] Others believe that 13 or 14 years could have been a serious problem and that anecdotal accounts of ancient seeds sprouting represent a rare exception. "Methuselah" was an anomaly. Generally, old seeds do not germinate. As the USDA asserts,

> There was no authenticated evidence that wheat taken from undisturbed Egyptian tombs will germinate. … [Even] the printed word does not seem to dispel the story of life in mummy seeds as such stories appear in the popular press from time to time. … The so-called mummy seeds have retained the shape of barley and wheat, but the structure is similar to that of charcoal. There is no possibility of these structures producing seedlings."[173]

True, Nephi's account is not talking about ancient, mummified seeds, but only seeds either transported for 13 to 14 years or 8 to 9 years. Still, most scientific studies of seed longevity have found that, under "ambient" or "normal" storage, seeds begin to lose viability within just two years, and the percentage that are viable for germination decreases after that. A recent literature review of multiple studies concluded that "under ambient or more natural soil conditions, viability drops considerably within a few years."[174] According to the University of Minnesota, the average longevity of most vegetable seeds is approximately 4–5 years.[175]

Several factors determine how long seeds can remain viable: temperature, moisture content, and length of storage in darkness. In the literature review above, the seeds had been in dark and cold storage below 18°C (64°F) — some as low as -18°C (-4°F).[176] The USDA asserts, "Unless crop seeds are kept under favorable storage conditions, they lose

172. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Judean Date Palm," last modified 21 June 2023, 16:28, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judean_date_palm#Germination_of_2000-year-old_seed.

173. Owen L. Justice and Louis N. Bass, "Principles and Practices of Seed Storage," United States Department of Agriculture (Science and Education Administration, Number 506, 1978), 216–17, https://naldc.nal.usda.gov/download/CAT87208646/PDF.

174. Svein Solberg et al., "Long-Term Storage and Longevity of Orthodox Seeds: A Systematic Review," *Frontiers in Plant Science* (3 July 2020), https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpls.2020.01007/full.

175. Arvo Kallio, "Vegetable Gardening Hints," Agricultural Extension Service, University of Minnesota (1979), https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/169297/mnext_misc_065.pdf.

176. "Some seeds will remain viable in storage for several years if stored under optimal conditions, namely low humidity and low temperature (42°F or 5.6°C)"; see "Seed Storage Guide," *Johnny's Selected Seeds* (2021): 1.

viability within a few years."[177] It appears factual that hot and moist seeds die within a few years; cold and dry seeds remain dormant, hence viable, for much longer. Now consider the circumstances of the seeds that were transported in the Lehites' camel train. As it turns out, the conditions couldn't have been worse:

- The seeds were not in cool temperatures of 70°F down to 0°F but in the desert heat of Arabia, where "summer heat is intense, reaching temperatures as high as 130°F (55°C) in places."[178] Winter temperatures are cooler, of course, but still "ranges between 8°C to 20°C [68°F to 46°F] in the interior parts while higher temperatures (19°C – 29°C [66°F – 84°F]) have been recorded in the coastal areas of Red Sea."[179]
- The seeds were probably strapped to the sides of the camels in shape-conforming burlap-like cloth bags. If so, that would have meant that they were separated from the bright Arabian sun only by simple cloth. Of course, the seeds could have been carried in huge clay pots, but this seems unlikely, given the large tents, provisions, and other goods the Lehites were also transporting.
- The seeds may have been dry as they crossed the arid desert, but they were likely moist, even damp, otherwise. In a discussion of climate in Arabia, *Britannica* reports that coastal regions "are subject to high summer humidity, with dew and fog at night or early morning."[180] The Dhofar area (both Khor Kharfot and Khor Rori) are known for early morning fog. Aston reports that "from May to September, there is a steady stream of cloud cover and fog that blankets the mountains, and moist air."[181] Consider, also, that the monsoon season can produce up to six inches of rain at a time. The average *annual* rainfall "is between 400–600 mm

177. Justice and Bass, "Principles and Practices of Seed Storage," 202.

178. Britannica, s.v. "Climate of the Arabian Desert," last updated April 7, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Desert/Climate.

179. "Saudi Arabia," *Climate Change Knowledge Portal* (website), https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/saudi-arabia/climate-data-historical.

180. *Britannica*, s.v. "Climate of the Arabian Desert."

181. Aston, "Lehi in Arabia," (video), timestamp 53.

> [15–24 inches]."[182] "In the southern coastal range of the Dhofar region, … in summer, the rains are usually light, but they occur almost *daily*."[183] So, humidity in Bountiful would have been very high, typical of the tropics and also high while crossing the ocean near the equator where the relatively small ship was close to sea-level. Finally, although the cargo and seeds may have been well protected, one has to wonder how they fared during the multi-day tropical storm described in 1 Nephi 18:13–21.

The traditional reading of 1 Nephi 17:4 (up to 14 years to planting) must be considered in interpreting Nephi's timeframe for the trek and Nephi's assertion that the crop "did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance" (1 Nephi 18:24). Admittedly, nothing said so far "proves" that the alternative reading is correct, and the traditional reading is wrong. The point is only that the difference between 8–9 years and 13–14 years might have been the difference between an abundant crop and barely enough to feed the people and generate new seeds for the next growing season. It seems obvious that "the older the seed, the less energy it has left in storage."[184] In sum, the seed question provides support that favors a shorter rather than a longer journey.

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182. "Saudi Arabia," *Climate Change Knowledge Portal*.

183. "Climate — Oman," *Climates to Travel: World Climate Guide*, https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/oman#southern_mountains.

184. Cody J. Garrett Tait, "Got Old Seeds? Help Them Sprout with These Tips and Tricks," *Garden Culture* (March 15, 2021), https://gardenculturemagazine.com/got-old-seeds-help-them-sprout-with-these-tips-and-tricks/.

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