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Abstract: Based on his explorations of the terrain from Jerusalem to the Red Sea, the author proposes a likely route Lehi and his family took as they fled Jerusalem. He also proposes a location for the Book of Mormon's valley of Lemuel. Using clues embedded in Nephi's account of the family's journey in the wilderness, Aston discusses the pros and cons of various routes that have been proposed over the years and expresses his preference for a route through the Negev Wilderness. He similarly comes to the conclusion that Wadi Tayyib al-Isim in the southern end of the Mazhafah ranges is the likeliest location for the valley of Lemuel.



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Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah’s Escape from Jerusalem

Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork

Warren P. Aston

In his exhaustively reasoned paper “Dating the Departure of Lehi from Jerusalem,”¹ Jeffrey Chadwick moved the discussion of the timing of the Lehite departure significantly further. Those like myself, who have long assumed that the Book of Mormon’s dating for the departure (about six hundred years before Christ’s birth) is simply a round, approximate number, now have additional reasons to see that the dating may, in fact, be literal and that a definitive year for the event might be within reach.

While I cannot add to the material on the dating of Lehi and Sariah’s departure from Jerusalem, I would like to offer some observations and suggestions on two aspects of their passage into Arabia that Chadwick’s paper deals with: first, the routing taken from Jerusalem; second, the valley of Lemuel, its possible location, and the timing of the family’s arrival there.

NEPHI’S DIRECTIONAL PROMISE TO THE READER

Over the years, my appreciation for Nephi’s accuracy in his record has continued to grow. In particular, I have marveled at how succinctly he incorporated into the text so many vital facts regarding the dimensions of the Lehite journey. Nowhere is Nephi’s sense of history and record-keeping more evident than in his attention to geographical matters that situate an essentially spiritual account in the physical world.

1. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Departure of Lehi from Jerusalem,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2018): 6–51.

In the introduction to his first book, Nephi states that his record includes “the course of their travels” (1 Ne., book heading). Careful reading reveals that, as promised, Nephi’s account gives directional statements for every stage of the land journey.² But as important as directions and periods of travel are, Nephi also incorporated a range of other clues in his record that are now possible to investigate.

Over recent years, this embedded detail has been the primary means of identifying plausible locations along the Lehiite journey that are now generally accepted within the Latter-day Saint scholarly community. Foremost, of course, is Ishmael’s burial place, Nahom (1 Ne. 16:34), which has not only firm archaeological support—dateable inscriptions—but also a long history preserving the name and location in Yemen from before Nephi’s day down to the modern day.³ There is also the land Bountiful (1 Ne. 17:5), plausibly identified as the inlet of Khor Kharfot in southern Oman based on its match with Nephi’s extensive description of the place⁴ and the Latter-day Saint ground exploration of the entire eastern Arabian coast (Yemen and Oman) made from 1988 to 1992.⁵

The unfolding of Nephi’s detailed travel account in recent decades, showing that plausible real-world locations exist for the journey he recorded, should engender confidence as we consider the other events and settings he describes.

2. For Nephi’s directional promises and their fulfillment, see Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris, 2015), 36.

3. See Warren P. Aston, “A History of NaHoM,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012), 78–98, which summarizes the history of Latter-day Saint awareness of the modern location and contains all relevant sources.

4. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 104–6, lists Nephi’s twelve descriptors of Bountiful, and page 126 shows the eight potential candidates in Yemen and Oman. Of these, Khor Kharfot is now accepted by most researchers (including those who had previously proposed other locations) as the most plausible location. One exception that currently remains is Khor Rori in the Salalah Bay, which is championed by some scholars, including George Potter and Richard Wellington. A factual comparison between Khor Rori and Khor Kharfot can be found in Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 147–48; see also 120–24, 149 n. 16, 153 nn. 29–30. Another possible location for the land Bountiful is Khor Mughsayl, as suggested in Wm. Revell Phillips, “Mughsayl: Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (hereafter *JBMS*) 16, no. 2 (2007): 48–59.

5. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 110–11.

The Matter of Tents

Before discussing these other locations, however, a too-often overlooked statement in Nephi's account deserves our attention. He tells us that Lehi "took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions," likely comprising such things as basic food stuffs, utensils, bedding, and hunting weapons, "and tents, and departed into the wilderness" (1 Ne. 2:4). The mention of *tents* here is significant. First, the possibility that a city dweller had multiple tents on hand tells us something of his occupation and abilities. Over the years, a theory has emerged among many researchers that Lehi may have been a smith, working and trading in precious metals, skills he passed onto his son Nephi.⁶ What is more relevant here, though, is that this virtually assures us that the departure from Jerusalem used camels, not mules or donkeys, as the primary means of carrying their belongings. Whether the individuals in the group themselves rode camels, or whether they used mules or walked, remains unclear from the text; in any case, opportunities to acquire additional camels would have come throughout their time in Arabia.

Tents in Lehi's time were made of coarse goat hair and are still used today by the Bedouin. Even a single panel of a desert tent is a heavy and awkward item, weighing hundreds of pounds, beyond the capacity of a mule to transport. Why is that important? The use of camels unavoidably enters the equation when we discuss the route that Lehi and Sariah's family most likely took when they left Jerusalem.

THE ROUTE TO THE RED SEA

Over the years, commentators have discussed possible routes that Lehi's small group (totaling just six persons according to the account given

6. The significance of Lehi having tents on hand at his Jerusalem home is often noted in discussions of his likely occupation: as a metal smith, most fully proposed by Jeffrey Chadwick in the chapter "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, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 81–130. The chapter also highlights the numerous instances throughout the text where Nephi's expertise with metals is on display.

The beautiful painting used to illustrate Jeffrey R. Chadwick's article, "Dating the Departure of Lehi from Jerusalem" (p. 6), probably shows fewer camels than they would have needed to carry multiple tents, in addition to depicting an unlikely, unnecessary nighttime departure.

in 1 Ne. 2:5)⁷ might have taken when fleeing Jerusalem. The idea that the party might have simply gone down from Jerusalem in an easterly direction, descending until they reached the Dead Sea near Qumran, then turning southward⁸ is easily ruled out by the terrain. Travel along the western side of the northern Dead Sea has always been completely blocked by the mountains that come directly down into the water; only in the late 1960s was the modern coastal road created, made possible by the declining levels of the salt sea over the past century.

Even in my own visits to the Dead Sea since 1976, I have seen the landscape change quite dramatically along its shores on both the Israeli and Jordanian sides. Areas under water just decades ago are now exposed, dry land; large sink holes are appearing on higher ground as the water table continues to drop.

7. The later (actually third) departure from Jerusalem, led by Nephi, Laman, Lemuel, and Sam, bringing Ishmael's family with them, easily exceeded the size of the original group led by Lehi; 1 Nephi 7:6 lists at least fifteen persons in total. See the summary in "How Many Others Traveled with Lehi to the Promised Land?" Book of Mormon Central, September 6, 2018, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/how-many-others-traveled-with-lehi-to-the-promised-land>, which cites John L. Sorenson's seminal study, "The Composition of Lehi's Family," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 174–96. In 2 Nephi 5:6, when Nephi and his followers are fleeing from Laman and Lemuel, Nephi mentions his "sisters" accompanying him. The Nephite record does not explain how these sisters joined the group or whether they came in the original departure from Jerusalem (making the group at least eight instead of six), but according to Erastus Snow, Joseph Smith claimed that the lost 116 pages containing the record of Lehi indicated that these sisters were married to Ishmael's sons, which may explain the family connection between Lehi and Ishmael and may also explain at least partially why Ishmael was persuaded to join Lehi's family in the wilderness. Snow's account does not specify, however, whether Lehi's daughters married Ishmael's sons before they all departed Jerusalem or afterward. Because the account mentions only the marriages of Lehi's sons to Ishmael's daughters, these other marriages may have occurred previous to the departure of Lehi. See Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 23:184 (May 6, 1882).

8. In 1976, Lynn and Hope Hilton considered a southerly route via Hebron and Beersheba but concluded that a route southward beside the Dead Sea was more likely. See Lynn M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 36–41. Twenty years later, their updated book, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 1996), 44–46, repeats this view.

Two other proposals have been made in recent years that are variations on the first. Both assume that the Lehites continued further east, passing Jericho and crossing the Jordan River. In the first scenario, they then turned southward along the gentler terrain known as the “Kings Highway” on the eastern, Jordanian side of the Dead Sea. Eventually this routing would bring them to the Red Sea.⁹ The second suggestion avoids travel beside the Dead Sea altogether. In this scenario, the Lehite group went still further eastward past Ammon (the modern Jordanian capital, Amman), then used the “Way of the Wilderness” highway, as its proponents term it, southward to the Red Sea. These two models can probably also be dismissed, as Chadwick’s paper notes. They are simply not viable because they place the Lehite group in territory controlled by the enemy states of Ammon and Moab.¹⁰

Instead, in a scenario jointly developed with D. Kelly Ogden,¹¹ Chadwick postulates that from Jerusalem the family first traveled southward, passing Bethlehem and Tekoa, then eastward to intersect with Nahal [river or wadi] Arugot in the Ein Gedi rift, and descending to the shore of the Dead Sea. From there they resumed their southward journey toward the Red Sea (fig. 1).

This setting, together with an alternative possibility, was succinctly presented in 2011 by Ogden, often regarded as the most experienced Latter-day Saint geographer of the Holy Land: “We believe that a more likely course for Lehi’s journey is southeast out of Jerusalem toward Tekoa and then along an ancient road to En Gedi (called the cliff or ascent of Ziz in 2 Chronicles 20:16), and thence southward through the Rift Valley and Arabah. An alternate route could have been from Tekoa southward, passing between the villages of Juttah and Carmel, down into and across the eastern Negev eastward to the Arabah.”¹²

9. George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2003), 14, 19–26.

10. Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 14, 19–26. See also Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “An Archaeologist’s View,” *JBMS* 15, no. 2 (2006): 70–71, which offers a fuller discussion of the possible routes from Jerusalem. See all of *JBMS* 15, no. 2 (2006), for a foundational commentary on all aspects of the Lehite journey.

11. See the joint attribution in Chadwick, “Archaeologist’s View,” 124 n. 12, referencing D. Kelly Ogden, “Answering the Lord’s Call (1 Nephi 1–7),” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Seven: 1 Nephi to Alma* 29, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 23 n. 8.

12. D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon, Volume 1: 1 Nephi through Alma* 29 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book,

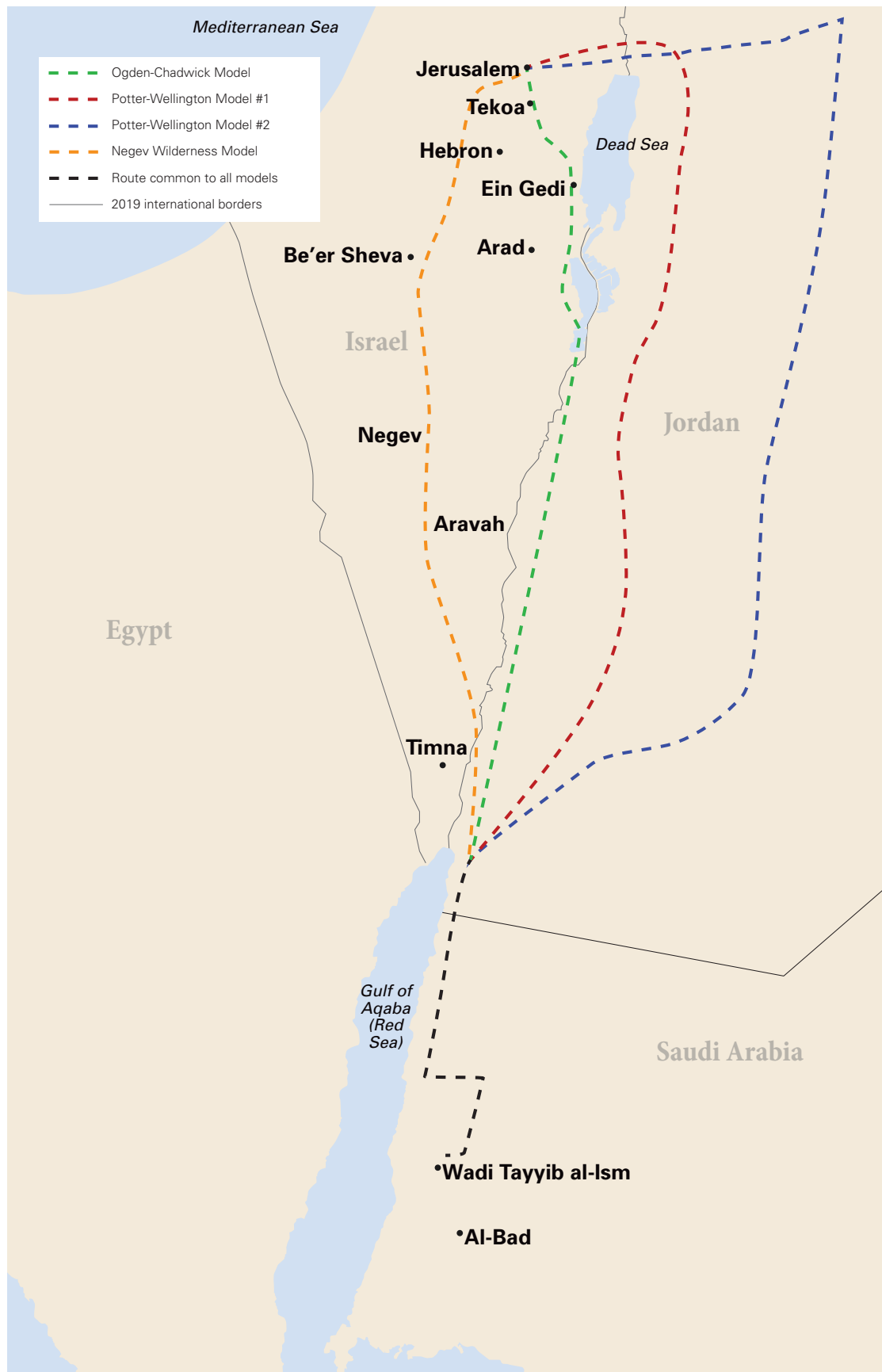


FIGURE 1. Map of the area from Jerusalem to the Red Sea, showing locations mentioned in this article and the various proposals for the Lehite route from Jerusalem to the valley of Lemuel. Courtesy Derek Gurr.

On the face of it, the route via Ein Gedi may seem to have much to commend it. Leaving Jerusalem and getting down quickly into the difficult terrain of Ein Gedi's picturesque wadis could be viewed as an attractive option. After all, much earlier, David did just that when escaping Saul (see 1 Sam. 24:1–22). However, in David's case, the terrain above Ein Gedi, inhospitable and full of caves suitable for hiding, was the destination, not simply a possible route to the Red Sea, as it would have been for the Lehites.

Although the Dead Sea levels have dropped considerably since 600 BC, the desert terrain surrounding it has changed little. The same ancient landforms remain, enabling us to see scenes that Lehi, Nephi, and others must have been familiar with. Revisiting recently the areas south and southeast of Jerusalem, including Ein Gedi, Arad, and Be'er Sheva, I asked myself what route I would choose if I were in Lehi's situation. I turned again to the text and asked myself, which environment would Lehi have known best? Which offered the family the best chance for safety? Which allowed the group to remove themselves from Jerusalem quickly? Ultimately, which route seems to be reflected in Nephi's account?

Having traveled on each of these routes, I have concluded that the two most realistic and efficient possibilities open to Lehi and his family were, first, the route via Ein Gedi proposed by Ogden and Chadwick and, second, another route that has been mentioned in discussions over the years but, in my view, often too hastily passed over.¹³ Both paths begin by escaping immediately in a southeast direction from Jerusalem; both eventually arrive at the Red Sea via the same wadi, the Aravah. Both require at least ten or twelve days of travel. But now consider the differences between the two alternatives:

The Ogden-Chadwick Model—Travel via Ein Gedi

This is where the earlier discussion of camels comes into play. First of all, a descent from the Judean wilderness to Ein Gedi with loaded camels

2011), 20. That this still represents his position was confirmed in an April 26, 2018, email from Ogden to the author.

13. In addition to the reference cited in the previous note, in 1967, Sidney B. Sperry suggested that the Lehites had "two choices: they could go either directly south of Jerusalem by the road through Hebron and Beersheba and thence through the great wilderness to the northern tip of what is now the Gulf of Aqaba, or they could go directly east across the Jordan until they struck the ancient 'King's Highway' and then proceed south." Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 97–98.

was, at a minimum, difficult and treacherous. From Ein Gedi, one can inspect the five modern hiking trails connecting with the Judean Desert above, although probably only two are realistic possibilities—today known as the “Ein Gedi” (fig. 2) and the “Yishay” ascents.

Nephi’s text indicates that leaving Jerusalem was a pre-emptive move following the unambiguous warning given by the Lord to Lehi. But while the account gives no indication that the group was actively pursued at any stage, the seriousness of the situation should not be underestimated. Jeremiah 26 relates that in that same period Jeremiah was detained, undergoing trial for prophesying the same unpopular message that Lehi had: that Jerusalem would be destroyed unless its people repented. And, in somewhat different circumstances, the prophet Urijah, who repeated Jeremiah’s warning, escaped to Egypt but was captured, returned to Jerusalem, and executed (Jer. 26:20–23).

It is worth noting, therefore, that traces of a Judean military guard post remain on the summit above Ein Gedi (fig. 3). Established about 630 BC in King Josiah’s time, its primary purpose was to observe threats approaching from the south and east, including guarding the track ascending from the oasis below. The guard post thus sits next to one of the possible descent routes, the “Ein Gedi Ascent” on the south side of Wadi David (fig. 4). Officials would certainly have noted the passage of Lehi and his family, who were not a typical company since the group included at least one woman—women did not ordinarily travel—and multiple bulky tents (Nephi uses the plural “tents” in 1 Ne. 2:4).

The other possibility for descending to Ein Gedi, and the option favored by Ogden and Chadwick, is via Nahal Arugot, the larger and more southerly of the two wadis leading down to Ein Gedi (fig. 5). While possible, taking either of these trails would have restricted the group to a narrow and difficult descent. Then, after reaching the Ein Gedi oasis—Israel’s second largest oasis and a populated place long before Lehi’s time—the only available direction of travel would have been southward along the Aravah Valley on the mostly quite narrow strip of land bordering the Dead Sea. This would have left no room to maneuver had they needed to evade or hide from pursuers or avoid other travelers whose reports to Jerusalem may have still placed them in jeopardy for the remaining seven to ten days of travel to the Red Sea.

The Alternative Route—Travel via the Negev Wilderness

In contrast to the first option (descending to Ein Gedi), the second route offers an undeniably more direct escape for as long as pursuit



FIGURE 2. The “Ein Gedi ascent” climbs the central massif on the left in this image. Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 3. The terrain above Ein Gedi showing the military guard post and one of the possible descent routes used by the Lehitites. Photograph courtesy Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.



FIGURE 4. A view looking westward up Nahal David to the Judean Desert above. Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 5. A rare aerial view of Ein Gedi beside the Dead Sea, facing west. Nahal Arugot is the wadi on the left; Nahal David is the wadi on the right. Photograph courtesy Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.

and capture remained a possibility. No slowing diversions or difficult descents would have been necessary at any stage. This route begins, as does the first route, with an immediate southerly exit from Jerusalem. But rather than diverting eastward across the Judean Desert to Ein Gedi, it remains in the Judean hill country, continuing southward into the wilderness—thus offering multiple route options and opportunities for secure rest points (see fig. 1).

Logically, the fact that settlements such as Hebron, Arad, and Be'er Sheva can be found in the vast expanse of country south of Jerusalem is not at all a disadvantage—these populated centers could easily have been avoided had they wished. And these inhabited pockets may have actually been resources for the Lehites, providing shelter for the small group—Lehi and Nephi might have developed contacts along the way if they had traveled to and from Timna near the Red Sea.¹⁴ Indeed, of the two routes,

14. If Lehi was a metal smith, the Timna mines almost certainly would have been the source of copper for smithing and for trading with others, including Egyptian traders known to frequent the same area.

the Negev option is arguably the one that would have been best known to Lehi and Nephi.

The southern Negev desert is known also as the “Wilderness of Zin,” sometimes termed the “Wilderness of Kadesh.”¹⁵ From here, several routes, including the main western trade route, led southeast across the southern Aravah Valley and then on to the Red Sea. To this observer, after repeated and wide-ranging travel in the areas south of Jerusalem, this option seems substantially more direct and less problematic. It is hard to see what benefit traveling via Ein Gedi would achieve. Thus, while both options remain possible, the Negev route seems to offer a more direct and less complicated passageway from Jerusalem.

BASE CAMP AT THE RIVER OF LAMAN IN THE VALLEY OF LEMUEL

Having arrived at the northern end of the Red Sea, or Gulf of Aqaba as it is more usually termed today, and safely distant from Jerusalem, Nephi describes three days of travel further into Arabia (1 Ne. 2:5–6) (fig. 1). This was likely—but not certainly—a region that Lehi was unfamiliar with. The text states that the family set up camp “in a valley by the side of a river of water” (1 Ne. 2:6), more specifically, we later learn, on the north side of the river.¹⁶ Had their camp been at the seashore, beside the Red Sea, rather than inland, Nephi would surely have noted the fact as he later does, twice, when the group arrived at Bountiful (1 Ne. 17:6). Instead, Nephi carefully records the location of the camp as being “in the borders *near* the mouth [of the river]” (1 Ne. 2:8, emphasis added), and thus inland.

This was the base camp where the final preparations were to be made for the one-way journey to the other side of the Arabian Peninsula. As they regrouped, the camp offered safety, a ready source of fresh water, and, we later learn, a surprising variety of food items.

Commentators from Hugh Nibley onward have noted that the sequence of events in Nephi’s account makes it rather clear that Lehi was unaware initially that their encampment actually sat at the beginning of

15. See C. Leonard Woolley and T. E. Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin* (London: Stacey International, 2003), for an account of travel in the area.

16. Since the group departed the valley of Lemuel “*across* the river Laman,” traveling toward Shazer in “nearly a south-southeast direction” (1 Ne. 16:12–13, emphasis added), their camp therefore lay on the north side of the river, the direction they had arrived from. It also implies that the river, at least where the campsite sat, ran in approximately an east-west direction.

a wadi that descended some distance until it reached the Red Sea.¹⁷ When Lehi became aware of that fact, he named the primary features of the place as first, the river of Laman, and then, the valley of Lemuel, in his heartfelt exhortations to his eldest sons (1 Ne. 2:9–10).

For Lehi, the valley was a place where he received revelation, foundational outpourings that he then taught his family. Here he had the time to read, assimilate, and then present the teachings and genealogy on the brass plates to the group. Here he viewed the vision of the tree of life and coming of the Messiah. Nephi also received revelations here relevant to his own future role and its part in the great purposes of God down to our own day.

From here, Lehi and Sariah's four sons twice journeyed back to Jerusalem; first, to secure the records held by Laban containing their genealogy, and, second, to bring Ishmael and his family with them to join the group (1 Ne. 3–4, 7). In the valley, Nephi, his three brothers, and Zoram (the former servant of Laban who had also joined the group) paired off with Ishmael's daughters and were married (1 Ne. 16:7). It remains possible that Nephi's sisters married Ishmael's sons at this time, although those marriages may have taken place earlier, before the family left Jerusalem.¹⁸

The Significance of Seeds

Concluding the account of the second and final return to Jerusalem by himself and his brothers, Nephi interrupts the flow of his narrative with a brief aside that may serve to emphasize the resources of the valley. While we can be sure that date palms at least grew near the river, there may have also been other fruits and grains present: "And it came to pass that we

17. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 85; Hilton and Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail*, 67–68; Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Tepran, 1999), 19; Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 32; S. Kent Brown, *Voices from the Dust* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2004), 6.

18. If the ancient Israelite custom of "cousin marriages" was being observed here, it is possible that Ishmael's daughters were already betrothed to Lehi's sons, while Ishmael's two sons may have already been married to Nephi's sisters. If correct, this scenario highlights the providence of the Lord in providing Zoram as a husband to Ishmael's eldest daughter. It may also account for the apparent readiness of Ishmael's family, who may not have known of Lehi's departure, to join the venture into the wilderness.

had gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind, both of grain of every kind, and also of the seeds of fruit of every kind” (1 Ne. 8:1).¹⁹

Later, as they prepared to leave, Nephi recorded that in the valley they had received the “remainder” of their provisions, again noting that “seed of every kind” was taken on the journey deep into Arabia: “And it came to pass that we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness” (1 Ne. 16:11).

Grains known in Nephi’s world were wheat, barley, and rye; “fruits” most likely meant the ubiquitous date, but also probably staples such as figs, olives, grapes, and pomegranates. If all these seeds were indeed gathered in the valley of Lemuel, this was no barren, sand-filled, wadi with a seasonal stream, but a place of some agricultural variety. What may first seem a minor point could be, in fact, a revealing insight into the valley of Lemuel that allows us to better visualize this stage of the journey and also helps us locate it.

Locating the Valley

Over the years, several locations for the valley of Lemuel have been suggested by Latter-day Saint commentators. Recently, I re-examined the top of the Red Sea, stretching from the Israeli city of Eilat across to its neighbor, the Jordanian city of Aqaba, sitting on either side of the Arava valley’s southern end. This allowed a re-examination of the quite narrow coastal strip on the Jordanian side that allows travel southward into the ancient land of Midian. Most of the ancient trade routes passed through this piece of land, which was effectively a bridge linking Arabia to the Levant and Mediterranean area. There is no question that the Lehite group entered Arabia proper through this gateway; no one argues otherwise.

In 1995, Wadi Nuwaybi in the southern part of this strip was proposed as a possible valley of Lemuel (fig. 6).²⁰ Re-examination confirmed the findings of a previous visit: Nuwaybi is a flat, broad, dry wadi bed running westward across the plain (which is about 4 to 5 kilometers or 2.5 to

19. While this verse may be referring to fruits and grains that grew in the valley, the text is ambiguous enough to allow for these seeds to have been gathered in Jerusalem, since Nephi elsewhere claims that the seeds they planted in the promised land had been brought “from the land of Jerusalem” (1 Ne. 18:24).

20. Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: A Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, Utah: Bradford and Willson, 1995), 4–6.



FIGURE 6. A view of Wadi Nuwaybi, looking inland near the southern border of Jordan. Photograph by the author.

3 miles wide in this area) with nothing—no water source, no walls of rock, no evident human traces—to distinguish it from dozens of other wadis. Furthermore, it is only about one day’s travel, not three, from the head of the Red Sea, a fact that in itself virtually disqualifies it as a candidate.

The narrow coastal strip beside the Red Sea continues southward from Wadi Nuwaybi near the border of southern Jordan into Arabia proper. It then doubles in width, forming a large delta of converging roads and wadis. Here, near the settlement of al Humaydah, both the ancient trade route’s main branch and modern highways veer inland.

Continuing southward along the coast, however, the coastal strip narrows again until a compact block of mountains, the rugged Mazhafah ranges, rises up abruptly from the desert. Just past the small promontory Ra’s Suwayil al Saghir, the Mazhafah peaks reach directly down into the waters of the Red Sea, blocking further travel southward.²¹ The coastal strip resumes several kilometers further on, continuing the

21. In recent years, a narrow track for military use only, raised just above sea level, has been blasted out along this coastal stretch; otherwise, the entire length of the Red Sea’s eastern coast can now be accessed by road.

entire length of the Red Sea's eastern coast, now accessible by road as far as Yemen.

The Mazhafah ranges assume the highest importance in any discussion about locating the valley of Lemuel. Based on the simple parameters of three days' travel from the head of the Red Sea at the speed at which loaded camels can travel (about 32–40 kilometers or 20–25 miles per day), the valley of Lemuel must lie somewhere in, or at least very close to, these mountains.

Also in 1995, a new possibility for the valley emerged, this time with the quite accidental discovery of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism (approximately "Valley of the Good Name") in the southern end of the Mazhafah ranges and thus plausibly three days' travel from the top of the Red Sea (fig. 1). This candidate was not reported until 1999,²² and based on the reports and images published, it was immediately seen by most researchers as a promising, even probable, candidate.²³

But while some Church members working in the region have visited Wadi Tayyib al-Ism over recent years to see it for themselves, no one—including the original discoverers—had completed the systematic exploration of the area needed to determine if viable alternatives existed.²⁴ The mountainous terrain here is such that satellite imaging has proved inadequate in providing definitive answers. This remained the situation until 2018 when I undertook a new exploratory effort.

This new effort allowed me to spend a month in the area south of the Jordanian border, much of it exploring the Mazhafah and adjoining mountains on all sides—the general area where the valley of Lemuel must have been. Of course, before exploring other potential Lehite locations such as Shazer, four days' travel further away, my prime objective

22. George D. Potter, "A New Candidate in Arabia for the 'Valley of Lemuel,'" *JBMS* 8, no. 1 (1999): 54–63.

23. S. Kent Brown, "The Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel," *JBMS* 16, no. 1 (2007): 64–73, offers a good outline of the issues around the various candidates suggested for the valley of Lemuel. While concluding that Wadi Tayyib al-Ism was indeed the "most secure" candidate (73), Brown's only expressed concern was about how the wadi could be accessed from the Aqaba area, a subject addressed in the current article.

24. As documented in their writings, the original investigators of the northwest corner of Arabia, George Potter and Richard Wellington traveled there on multiple occasions, contributing an invaluable baseline of field studies in connection with the valley of Lemuel and Shazer. See Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 31–52. My explorations in the same area in 2018 and 2019 have built upon this foundation.

was to explore other possibilities for the valley of Lemuel and to closely examine Wadi Tayyib al-Ism itself. At all times, the question of access for a caravan heading deep into Arabia was paramount.

As part of the exploration, I spent several days examining a third location proposed in 1976 for the valley, the expansive Wadi Ifal, in which the town of Al-Bad is located (fig. 7).²⁵ Al-Bad (or Al-Bad'a) sits amid its broad plain southeast of the Mazhafah peaks. Another range of mountains sits as a distant backdrop in the east, and some ancient wells and ruins are situated at Wadi Ifal's center. But these wells are not the running river that Nephi describes, nor are the mountains in any direction especially noteworthy. And, at some 170 kilometers (105 miles) or more from Aqaba, the distance is realistically too far to be reached in three days.

Access to the Valley

Eventually, I returned to the Red Sea coast for a closer look. At Bir Marsha, just before the precipitous Mazhafah terrain encroaches onto the beach, all the pieces seemed to fall into place. Along this coastline, several dry wadis lead up into the mountainous interior. Most of them run inland into the interior folds of rock before ending. All receive only occasional brief rainfall before drying up, leaving little or no vegetation.

However, near Ra's Suwayil al Saghir promontory, two of these wadis, Wadi Hasha and, about 7 kilometers (4.5 miles) further south, Wadi al-Hulayb stretch eastward up into the mountains to intersect with other interior wadis that then offer straightforward, perfectly feasible access to Wadi Tayyib al-Ism. Eventually, I assessed the more defined and southerly of the two, Wadi al-Hulayb, beginning almost directly opposite the modern coastguard station, as the more likely. It leads into the mountains to meet a broad dry valley, Wadi al-Sharma, which runs almost southward until it intersects Wadi Tayyib al-Ism.²⁶

Surrounded on all sides by mountain terrain and near the junction of these two wadis, al-Sharma and Tayyib al-Ism, sits a small but fertile oasis about 2.5 square kilometers (1 square mile) in area. Despite being home to several wells and acres of date palms, the oasis is bypassed by the main flow of traffic and is uninhabited today. No research by

25. The Al-Bad proposal was first made by Lynn M. and Hope Hilton in *In Search of Lehi's Trail* and was later repeated in their *Discovering Lehi*, 51–66. S. Kent Brown reports that as of 2007, this position has been maintained by Lynn Hilton. Brown, "Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel," 86 n. 10.

26. Images of Wadis Hulayb and Sharma can be seen in Potter, "New Candidate," 54–55, 60.



FIGURE 7. The town of Al-Bad with its ancient ruins and wells lies within the wide Wadi Ifal. Photograph by the author.

archaeologists or anthropologists has yet been published about the oasis where the river begins or about the valley itself and, while the Red Sea end of the valley is now a popular tourist attraction, the oasis is a place of only occasional visits by locals.²⁷

While it remains possible that the Lehite group turned inland earlier along the more traveled route and accessed this same spot from the eastern side of the mountains before reaching Al-Bad—over 170 kilometers (104 miles) total from Aqaba²⁸—the lack of any hint in the text for this suggests that they instead simply traveled along the coast, then turned inland when they could go no further. The wadis mentioned earlier would have allowed ready access to the site of their base camp. This would have been the shorter route, about 118 kilometers (73 miles) total,²⁹ thus fitting neatly into the three days’ travel distance recorded by Nephi. In both cases, however, these routes place the traveler squarely in Wadi Tayyib al-Ism.

27. The specific encampment proposed for the Lehiters in the upper part of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism is pictured in Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 32–33, and in Brown, “*Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel*,” 68.

28. Correspondence from George Potter to S. Kent Brown, cited in “*Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel*,” 86 n. 8, states the distance is “104 miles.” Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 27, states the distance is “over 122 miles.”

29. On the road distance from Aqaba to the head of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, see the account in Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 27–28, which appears to present the distance as a total of about 73 miles.



FIGURE 8. A view of the deeply incised Wadi Tayyib al-Ism where it now reaches the Red Sea coast. Photograph by the author.

A “Valley, Firm and Steadfast, and Immovable” (1 Ne. 2:10)

As I examined Wadi Tayyib al-Ism alongside the other possibilities proposed over the years, the differences were very evident. In particular, no other location has a flow of water running continually anywhere, much less into the Red Sea. No other place evokes Lehi’s emotive language in wishing that his two eldest sons had the qualities of character suggested by the granite mountains, over two thousand feet high, towering over both sides of the wadi near the coast, and the constantly flowing stream within it (fig. 8). The wadi is not only fully accessible but also sits within the correct three days’ travel distance from the head of the Red Sea. It would have provided Lehi and Sariah’s group what it still does today: a sheltered haven with all the resources of a fertile oasis. The easy, unforced convergence of the details outlined here established it firmly for me as the place described by Nephi.

A “River, Continually Running” (1 Ne. 2:9)

Unsurprisingly, the novelty (and apparent anomaly) of a river in Arabia being claimed in the Book of Mormon account has been given much attention by commentators. Many Latter-day Saint researchers have



FIGURE 9. Inland of Bir Marsha on the coast, the dry wadis in the distance offer access to the interior of the Mazhafah mountains. Photograph by the author.

accepted the scholarly consensus that Arabia contains no perennial rivers, therefore assuming that Nephi's reference must refer only to a seasonal flow of water. In asserting this, it has become common to minimize the text's plain wording by describing the river as a mere "stream" (a term that nowhere appears in the Book of Mormon, except in a quote from Isaiah, recorded in 2 Ne. 21:15).³⁰

In making this assumption, of necessity these commentators go on to question whether the existing flow of water at Wadi Tayyib al-Ism runs year-round and highlight the fact that the water now moves underground for several hundred meters before reaching the ocean, as if this somehow disqualifies the location. Chadwick is among those who have taken this position. He has raised the idea that one of the dry wadis reaching the coast near Bir Marsha, pictured in figure 9, could have been the valley itself and that Nephi's terminology of a "river, continually running" (1 Ne. 2:9) to the Red Sea might be referring not to *water*, but to the *streambed* in the wadi instead.³¹ As a result, Chadwick is able to pinpoint a brief departure window from Jerusalem (in the middle of the month corresponding to November) to have the Lehites arrive in the valley when winter rains might briefly provide enough water to flow as a seasonal stream.³²

30. Examples of this position include Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 76–81; Hilton and Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail*, 64–65; and Chadwick, "Dating the Departure of Lehi," 42–44.

31. Chadwick, "Archaeologist's View," 72–73.

32. Chadwick, "Dating the Departure of Lehi," 42–44.

Chadwick, who has not traveled in the region south of the Jordanian border, gives two primary reasons why he does not believe that the river of Laman was a permanent fixture in the valley.³³ I will now contrast these assumptions with the reality one can find on the ground, as it were.

First, he states, “There are very few perennial streams that run into the Red Sea’s Gulf of Aqaba from the desert *wadis* on its eastern coast.”³⁴ In fact, after examining, on the ground, the entire eastern coast of the Red Sea (over 1,800 kilometers, or 1,130 miles) from Aqaba south to the Yemen border, I can state with certainty that there is only one such perennial stream reaching the Red Sea today, not “very few.” It is the stream at Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, now reaching above ground to within a short distance of the Red Sea (figs. 10 and 11).

We also have the statements of Latter-day Saint observers and non-Latter-day Saint scientists, made over several years, in all seasons, that this stream indeed runs permanently without halting or drying up. This fact is noted in various studies that discuss the valley. One report, for example, published in 2017, was an extensive geological study of the natural springs in northwest Saudi Arabia; it describes the flow of water within Wadi Tayyib al-Ism as emerging from a gravity-fed spring some 1,600 meters, or about one mile, inland, flowing “continuously as a small stream” toward the Gulf of Aqaba. That this flow of water is year-round is confirmed in the paper.³⁵

As a side note, there are some little-known perennial streams of surprising beauty in the interior of that vast region of Arabia;³⁶ however,

33. Chadwick, “Dating the Departure of Lehi,” 42. Chadwick has also previously noted in other writings that he has not traveled south of the Jordan border.

34. Chadwick, “Dating the Departure of Lehi,” 42, italics in original.

35. See Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 37–39. Technical detail can be located in Mohammed Abdullah Alsaleh, “Natural Springs in Northwest Saudi Arabia,” *Arabian Journal of Geosciences* 10, no. 15 (August 2017), <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs12517-017-3126-6.pdf>, which shows images of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism (fig. 8) and contains interesting statistics about its geography, water flow, and water quality.

36. See the impressive images of Wadi Qaraqir (also known as Wadi Dissah), inland and south of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, in Florent Egal, “Wadi Qaraqir—Dissah,” *The Saudi Arabia Tourism Guide*, updated August 24, 2016, <http://www.saudiarabiatourismguide.com/wadi-qaraqir/>. This stream and the more distant Wadi al-Bardani (Mohammed al-Harbi, “PHOTOS: Wadi al-Bardani, Saudi Arabia’s Most Beautiful Valley,” *Al Arabiya*, updated January 18, 2018, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/life-style/travel-and-tourism/2018/01/18/PHOTOS-Wadi-al-Bardani-Saudi-Arabia-s-most-beautiful-valley.html>) hint at how Tayyib al-Ism may have appeared before the water flow was reduced.



FIGURE 10. Wadi Tayyib al-Is'm's above-ground stream today cascades over well-worn rocks. The smaller image shows the enlarged stream following winter rains. Photographs by the author.



FIGURE 11. Just as described by Nephi, the modern stream of water in Wadi Tayibb al-Ism still reaches literally to the water’s edge at the Red Sea just inches below the surface permanently and sometimes also above ground. In this image, taken in November 2019 near the end of the dry season, the surface flow extends to within forty-two meters of sea level. Photograph by the author.

none empty into the Red Sea as Nephi describes. They hint at how Wadi Tayyib al-Ism may have appeared in Lehi’s time. Still, millennia ago the situation may have been somewhat different. As John Tvedtnes noted, early historians such as Herodotus (writing about 440 BC), Agatharchides, and Strabo described other rivers from that period, some of them located in the same area as Wadi Tayyib al-Ism.³⁷ It seems certain that the river in Wadi Tayyib al-Ism is one of those described.

The second objection given in Chadwick’s article is that in such a dry region as Arabia any perennial stream would have been “well settled, long prior to Lehi’s arrival.”³⁸ As a general rule, of course this is true; wells on the trade routes, for example, always have claimants. But, as I will note in my conclusion, there are at least two exceptions that prove the rule. Both are Book of Mormon related: locations I believe are the

37. John A. Tvedtnes, “More on the River Laman,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 25, no. 3 (2005): 2–3.

38. Chadwick, “Dating the Departure of Lehi,” 42.

most plausible candidates for the valley of Lemuel and the land Bountiful. Despite both locations having perennial fresh water, today, at least, both are uninhabited. This, of course, does not mean that the oasis of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism had no owners or that Lehi's group was not obliged to seek permission from whoever controlled the river and wells.

Quite unique geographical circumstances shelter these two locations from general access, which may have preserved them for the Lehi group. These factors result in both locations having no resident population today, twenty-six centuries later. I have concluded that the Lord intended this migratory group to be set apart, isolated, from their fellows on at least two occasions—at the beginning of the Arabian journey, when so many preparations needed to be made, and at its end, when a concentrated effort was needed to build the vessel that would carry them two-thirds of the way around the globe.

As noted earlier, in preparing to leave the valley, Nephi recorded that the Lord had provided for them there, including possibly multiple “provisions” and “seed of every kind” for the group (1 Ne. 16:11), just as he later acknowledged that Bountiful was a place “prepared of the Lord” for them (1 Ne. 17:5).

In my reading of Nephi's first book, it is quite clear that he says the river ran continually to the Red Sea; it would obviously follow that the water channel and the wadi enclosing it would do so more-or-less likewise. But I believe we are splitting hairs to suggest that the size and extent of the current stream might disqualify the location as the valley of Lemuel. Even if this was all that existed in Lehi's day, I would not fault the accuracy of Nephi's text or his father's choice of a descriptive name. But there is more evidence that a river, not merely the modern stream, ran here.

Other Indications of a River, Not a Stream, in the Past

While the present stream goes underground just before reaching the Red Sea, the base and the sides of the wadi, including just before it reaches the shore, preserve the unmistakable signs of long-term erosion in its hard granite (figs. 12, 13). A scientist who specializes in the erosion of rock surfaces described the erosion in Wadi Tayyib al-Ism as follows: “Granite breaks down by weathering to a mixture of clay, sand and gravel; when carried by water this sediment is abrasive and smooths the floor of the wadi and there is much evidence of sand and gravel in the valley floor . . . derived from the bedrock. The smoothing of the rock surface along the lower sides of the valley indicates that there have been higher volumes of water flowing through the valley probably in the past but also,



FIGURE 12. Even to a lay person, the effects of substantial long-term water erosion are evident on the rounded sides and smoothed base of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism. Photograph by the author.



FIGURE 13. Long-term water erosion evident in Wadi Tayyib al-Ism. Photograph by the author.

perhaps, associated with flash floods in the present day.”³⁹ The erosion is broad in places and up to about one meter or about three feet high on the sides of the wadi. A very substantial flow of water—a river—once ran through this valley over a very long period.

Chadwick’s third and major objection to the site is that “the stream has no mouth into the Red Sea.”⁴⁰ In other words, the modern water flow no longer reaches the present Red Sea shore. This perceived deficiency is quite easily explained by the reduced flow of water over the last century due to expansions in farming and industrial usage, something the place has in common with all other water resources in the region. This would also explain why the alluvial fan of debris normally found at the mouth of any river is not found at the present shoreline.

But other factors come into play. As was noted over a decade ago, it is probable that the coastline here 2,600 years ago was different than what

39. Email correspondence, April 24, 2018, between the author and Dr. Cherith Moses, professor of geomorphology, University of Sussex.

40. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail and the Valley of Lemuel,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 212; see also 209, 213–14.

it is today.⁴¹ While the sea levels in the Gulf of Aqaba may have changed little since Lehi's day, there are multiple evidences for some degree of geological uplift on the Red Sea coast, although the extent of this remains unclear.⁴² Importantly, the height of the lower reaches of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism may only require an uplift in the order of tens of feet, not the hundreds of feet variation mentioned in some commentary on the extent of tectonic uplift.

CONCLUSIONS

With regard to the route taken out of Jerusalem by Lehi and his family, room exists for either of the possibilities discussed. In either scenario, we can note, with some satisfaction, still more vindication of Nephi's accuracy in recording his history. Had the family escaped via Ein Gedi as Ogden and Chadwick suggest, they were in the Judean wilderness until reaching the Aravah valley, a name that itself means "wilderness," and then until they reached the head of the Red Sea.

Alternatively, had they used the Negev route suggested here, from Jerusalem they would likewise have entered the Judean wilderness, the Negev, allowing travel further southward until the Wilderness of Zin was reached. Finally, the turn eastward—for which there are multiple possibilities—would see them enter the third wilderness, the Aravah valley, before the Red Sea was reached. In either case, what first appears as a simple statement by Nephi that his family had departed "into the wilderness" turns out to have significantly more descriptive depth and accuracy behind it than anyone could have supposed.

As for the valley of Lemuel and the river of Laman, there no longer remain any issues regarding Wadi Tayyib al-Ism lacking simple, ready solutions. The valley has a permanent year-round flow of water to the Red Sea with geological evidence indicating that the flow was much larger over a very long period in times past. The question of how the sheltered fertile pocket in its interior can be accessed in a way that matches Nephi's account has been answered, as presented earlier.

41. Brown, "Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel," 71.

42. Michael Lloyd Ingraham and others, "Saudi Arabian Comprehensive Survey Program: C. Preliminary Report on a Reconnaissance Survey of the Northwestern Province (with a Note on a Brief Survey of the Northern Province)," *Atāl: The Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology (ATLAL)* 5 (AH 1401, AD 1981), 59–84, notes multiple indications of uplift in the area under discussion in this article.

The truly stark contrast between it and any other possibilities means that the time has come, I believe, for Wadi Tayyib al Ism to move from being judged the “most secure candidate for the Valley of Lemuel”⁴³ to at least being accepted as the candidate that most plausibly matches Nephi’s account.

It cannot be mere coincidence that the Arabian segment of the Lehite journey began and ended precisely at remarkable locations that provided for the group’s specific needs at the time. The most plausible candidates for both locations—for the valley of Lemuel at the beginning and the land Bountiful at its end—were, and still are, sources of that rarest of commodities in Arabia, year-round fresh water, and remain uninhabited, even today.

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43. Brown, “Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel,” 73.