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Part 4: "Travel Nearly Eastward From That Time Forth"

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Abstract: The Lehite journey across Arabia falls naturally into three major thrusts: from Jerusalem down to the Valley of Lemuel, from there down to Nahom, and then across to Bountiful. After an extended stay at the valley and the two short stops that followed, travel to the vicinity of Nahom probably took a few weeks at most. With their arrival at Nahom, perhaps intending a stay of at least a year, some 1,400 miles/2,250 km had been covered since leaving Jerusalem. Some 600 miles/970 km still separated them, though, from their destination on the coast, the place they would name "Bountiful."

Nephi's account explicitly tells us that the final stage from Nahom across to Bountiful was the most arduous of the journey. The group was now in the Jauf Valley at the southern edge of the Empty Quarter, a place of vast shifting dunes avoided even by the Bedouin. Anciently - and still today - this is the first opportunity for travel across the Arabia peninsula in an easterly direction.

However, while it offers traversable terrain, the stony desert plateau eastward from Nahom remains a forbidding prospect to any traveler. It offers no water or fodder sources, or any crop-growing opportunities. In the twenty-first century it remains without wells, roads, or settlements. With only short-term camping feasible, the leg from the Nahom to Bountiful was thus not only the most difficult, but the longest non-stop stage of the entire land journey.

PART 4

*“Travel Nearly Eastward From
That Time Forth”*

**“And it came to pass that we did again take our journey in the wilderness;
and we did *travel nearly eastward from that time forth.*”
(1 Nephi 17:1)**

Lehi, Sariah and their group spent years in the desert wilderness of Arabia. The majority of their actual travel time would have been spent traversing *stony* or gravel terrain like this, rather than sand dunes, which are harder to cross with loaded camels and rarely have water and fodder sources.

Introduction

The Lehiite journey across Arabia falls naturally into three major thrusts: from Jerusalem down to the Valley of Lemuel, from there down to Nahom, and then across to Bountiful. After an extended stay at the valley and the two short stops that followed, travel to the vicinity of Nahom probably took a few weeks at most. With their arrival at Nahom, perhaps intending a stay of at least a year, some 1,400 miles/2,250 km had been covered since leaving Jerusalem. Some 600 miles/970 km still separated them, though, from their destination on the coast, the place they would name “Bountiful.”

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However, while it offers traversable terrain, the stony desert plateau eastward from Nahom remains a forbidding prospect to any traveler. It offers no water or fodder sources, or any crop-growing opportunities. In the twenty-first century it remains without wells, roads, or settlements. With only short-term camping feasible, the leg from the Nahom to Bountiful was thus not only the most difficult, but the *longest* non-stop stage of the entire land journey.

The Irrelevance of the Trade Routes after Nahom

Early LDS commentators made the natural assumption that Lehi essentially followed a trade route from Nahom to Bountiful. More

recently, the suggestion has been made that the Lehiites could have journeyed from Nahom to Bountiful via Marib and Shabwah. A closer look at both Nephi’s account and the historical realities involved reveals a very different story. In fact, from Nahom onwards trade routes become completely irrelevant, ruled out by Nephi’s own statement that they traveled “nearly eastward” from Nahom. *No route ever extended in an “eastward” direction from Nahom.* We now know that this very region, the Jauf, marked a major change in direction. Here the trade route split; a minor leg veering *south* toward Aden, and the major branch tending *southeast* to the oasis of Marib, and then to either Shabwah or Timna. From these two cities the route then led directly to the coast, to the seaport of *Qana*, the modern Bir Ali, and the port of Mouza. Both are listed in the first century AD *Periplus* as the primary ports in southern Arabia in that period.¹ At times a land route went *northwest* from Shabwah for hundreds of miles, avoiding the great Hadhramaut Rift, before descending in a great arc to reach the Dhofar coast. The bulk of the incense trade, however, was shipped by sea.

Re-stated, had the Lehiites traveled along a trade route from Nahom onwards, the direction of travel could *not* be described as “nearly eastward.” Their entire journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful would then have essentially merely followed the commercial trade route, albeit in reverse. This concept is so obviously alien to the journey that Nephi recorded that it is impossible to reconcile with the account. Not only could their journey have been made in a fraction of the time that it took, but there would have been no need for a Liahona, or the difficulties of the last stage of travel from Nahom onwards. Most significantly, their journey from Nahom would have resulted in them arriving at a coastal area far removed from Nephi’s description of Bountiful.

Nephi's Directional Accuracy

While four brief verses (17:1-4) are all that record the journey from Nahom to Bountiful, as discussed previously, Nephi's earlier account of the journey demonstrates that he could ascertain directions with great accuracy. Had the party traveled *east-northeast* or *east-southeast*, for example, Nephi was quite capable of determining that degree of variation and would surely have so stated. When he then describes the direction of travel from Nahom to Bountiful as "nearly eastward" (17:1), there is no reason to not take his statement absolutely literally; i.e., the direction *was* almost due east. As a direction of "nearly eastward" seems almost nebulous compared to his earlier statements, some readers may assume that perhaps the group meandered or wandered in its path, leaving Nephi to only generalize the direction traveled. However, we now know that, in fact, their journey from Nahom to Bountiful *was* so close to true east that he was recording the direction of travel as accurately as was possible.

Nephi's simple statement that they traveled "nearly eastward" from Nahom becomes a stunning vindication of the Book of Mormon's historicity. None of the classical or contemporary references to the incense trade mention this major change in direction, so it follows that Joseph Smith could not have known from them that there was such a turn, nor where it occurred.



The topography from Nahom eastwards to the coast.

And there is a further dimension to the matter of direction after Nahom. It comes from the specification, written well after the fact, that they traveled nearly eastward *from that time forth*. This seems to stipulate that this direction continued to be followed all the way to the coast. Indeed, the account mentions no detours, breaks in the travel, or any reason requiring a change of direction. Exploration and satellite imagery has shown that maintaining an easterly course was actually the only feasible way to reach the coast where Bountiful awaited.

“Nearly eastward” Toward the Coast

Had Lehi's group traveled even east-northeast or east-southeast from Nahom, they would have encountered the shifting sand dune deserts of the feared "Empty Quarter" to the north, or the equally-difficult

Ramlat Saba'tayn desert to the south. Many of the constantly shifting dunes tower hundreds of feet high; they are simply too steep to be crossed by loaded camels. Instead, surely led by the Liahona, traveling almost true east from Nahom placed them on a narrow band of stony plateaus and valleys leading between the two deserts to the coast. A sequence of arid plateaus and valleys averaging 3,000 feet/900 meters altitude leads from the Wadi Jauf or Nahom area to low ranges north of the Hadhramaut Valley. From here, the Mahra plateau leads into the Qamar ranges on the coast of southern Oman.²

Thus, not only is travel from Nahom in a direct easterly direction possible, but it is actually the *most* direct and only accessible route that one would take to reach the tiny area of fertile coast. No physical obstacles, whether sand dunes, mountains, steep ravines, or lava fields, prevent travel between the Nahom area and Dhofar. **That a completely accessible and feasible “nearly eastward” pathway, with no intervening obstacles, from Nahom to the only fertile coast in Arabia can now be shown is one of the most significant findings in recent years concerning the Lehite journey.** Surprisingly, the implications of this fact have yet to be fully assimilated by many writers on the subject.

Lessons from History

A well-known statement from early LDS church history, apparently written by Frederick G. Williams, stating that Lehi turned nearly east at the “nineteenth degree of north latitude” [i.e., just south of modern Jeddah and Mecca] is not supportable as an inspired utterance. This same writing designates Chile in South America as Lehi’s landing place, a conclusion also completely at odds with all the evidence. Both claims must be regarded as well-intentioned, but unofficial, speculation that is not supported by the evidence.³

However, history opens a striking window into conditions in the Jauf area only a few centuries after the Lehite passage. In addition to showing that the region of Nehem was indeed the area where easterly travel was possible, it vividly confirms Nephi’s picture of danger and hardship. Most scholars now agree that it was at the walled city of Baraqish that the invading Roman Army under Aelius Gallus, in 25 BC, arranged for food supplies before marching east into the desert. Their goal was to discover and exploit the source of incense, and the most direct route took them initially *eastward*, not southeast to the fertile plains and dams at Marib, as some writers have supposed. Without a Liahona or other divine guidance, thousands of men died in the desert. Before they perished at “Marsiaba” (almost certainly the present al ’Abr), prisoners captured there told the Romans that they were only a two-day march from the country that produced “aromatics,” or legendary Shabwah, the junction nearer the coast through which all trade routes passed.⁴ Thus, a tragic footnote in the history of southern Arabia provides support for the accuracy of an even earlier travel account that kept by Nephi.

Bondage in the Desert?

Speculation recently advanced that Lehi and Sariah’s group may have been held captive, or kept in some type of bondage by local people while in Arabia,⁵ has little to commend it. In the first place, it is hard to imagine why Nephi would not have recorded such a dramatic and significant event in his account when he showed no hesitation in recording conflicts and difficulties otherwise. Such a major event delaying their progress would have provided unparalleled teaching opportunities for Lehi. It almost certainly would have occasioned revelations, just as other significant events did, and any loss of liberty would have provided a supreme object lesson, one worth recording for posterity. But nothing like this is mentioned, even obliquely.

Captivity or servitude also fails to merit a mention when Nephi's brothers complain about the journey to Bountiful (17:17-22) or in Nephi's response, as he rehearses to them, at great length, the obstacles overcome by faith thus far (17:23-52). Throughout the entire record we find various minutiae; Nephi striking rocks together to make fire, for example, but no stirring account of a delivery from any physical bondage. Later references, written from the perspective of some five centuries of tumultuous Nephite history, record that the Nephite's ancestors were delivered many times "out of the hands of their enemies" (Alma 9:10), and were "brought out of bondage time after time" (Alma 9:22) and speak of them being preserved from "falling into the hands of their enemies."

These are clearly general references to the initial escape of the Lehites from the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem, and then their survival against the numerically greater Lamanites in the New World, not a reference to their travel from Nahom to Bountiful. Thus, the reference to being brought out of bondage "time after time" is clearly not referring to a single event, but rather the cyclic one of faith and "unfaithfulness" when they were "driven back" (Mosiah 1:17). Without further information, these seem more attractive possibilities than thinking that Lehi and his people endured some kind of captivity or servitude while in the least populated desert of all.

Finally, and most tellingly, Alma who had access to the full account of Lehi's journey actually reveals what the group's afflictions were: as with the Israelites' escape from Egypt, their trials were "hunger and thirst" (Alma 37:41-42, compare Exodus 16:3, 17:3) rather than any bondage or servitude. This fits perfectly with what we now know of the terrain they had to cover to reach Bountiful. While we cannot rule it out entirely, given the scantiness of the record we currently have, none of the Book of Mormon prophets who wrote of the Lehite exodus recorded any loss of liberty, nor do the logistics of the journey require it.

Mixed Blessings in the Wilderness

Moving far from the water sources of the trade routes, the Lehites' easterly course took them into the vast Mahra Province, one of the least hospitable places on earth.⁶ Even today, al Mahra remains the least developed and most untouched part of the Republic of Yemen. Nephi's repeated emphasis on the difficulty of their travel (17:1, 2, 6) makes it clear that they were far from the regular wells and settlements of trade routes. Probably traveling by night and resting by day, the light or smoke of fires may have invited attack by robbers. In any case, wood to burn would be almost nonexistent. Nephi noted (17:12) "The Lord had not hitherto suffered that we should make much fire, as we journeyed in the wilderness." The subtle inference here is that the Lord permitted them to cook with fire only infrequently; as compensation they are told in the same verse that the Lord would make their food "sweet" so it would not need cooking. Nephi had earlier noted that they ate their meat raw (17:2), certainly sun-dried and preserved with spice and herb seasoning as both Arabs and Western hikers still do.

While not being able to cook is usually viewed as a hardship by the modern reader, it may actually have been one of the great "blessings" that Nephi mentions (17:2), releasing the women from the burden of daily cooking and leaving them more strength and time to take care of themselves and their babies. And, although the women were able to nurse their infants (17:2), camel's milk may also have been an important factor helping all members of the group cope with the lack of water during this final stage of their sojourn. The Liahona, which earlier had led them to the "more fertile parts," now likely also functioned by directing them to water resources until Bountiful was reached. Water wells are non-existent in this remote region, but ephemeral pools of water can last for many weeks in stony desert after rain has fallen, an

event sometimes years apart. Such water pools are not possible in sandy terrain.⁷

All this paints a clear and consistent picture of life *away* from other peoples (among whom, of course, the making of fire would have presented no difficulty), rather than merely continuing on a trade route. Of their eight-year wilderness journey, this longest and most arduous stage must have occupied a minimum of a month and possibly several times that.



This rare water pool on the Mahra plateau east of Nahom, from rain months previously, offers a clue as to how the Lehites may have survived without wells after leaving Nahom. The surrounding terrain is typical of the Mahra plateau.

While the “many afflictions and much difficulty”(17:6) of this final stage were so great that Nephi felt unable to write them all, they were not without their compensations. Nephi records that the women were able to “bear children in the wilderness” (17:1) and “so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us” that the women “did give plenty of

suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men” (17:2). The same verse relates that the women “began to bear their journeyings without murmurings,” thus becoming another blessing. Having come from a privileged background in Jerusalem, the women were now hardened by desert life and could fully assume their roles alongside the men.⁸

While it remains true that Nephi recorded very little in the four verses (1 Nephi 17:1-4) covering the journey from Nahom to Bountiful, what he *did* record is surely significant. Of all that he could have written, Nephi chose to focus on the fact that the group had been blessed and that “ways and means” were provided by God in the wilderness as the commandments were kept.⁹ It is likely that the privations and hardships endured during this last stage of travel were intended by the Lord to strengthen the group collectively; they demonstrated God’s power in leading them across hundreds of miles of desert reaches away from trade routes and water sources. Group cohesion would be essential, not only to their daily survival, but to the discipline they would need at Bountiful in constructing their ship and then sailing it for a year or more. In any event, no eruptions of complaining or rebellion are mentioned until after they reached the comfort of Bountiful. After years in the wilderness, ever more removed from their homeland as they traveled, the younger members of the party would have had little or no recollection of Jerusalem life. Solitude and hardship would further dim the adult’s memories of their old life also, and serve to help Lehi and Sariah develop the nucleus of a society prepared for a New World.

In everything that Nephi recorded about travel to and from Nahom we see, once again, a converging of many disparate and subtle details, all coming together to witness the accuracy of Nephi’s deceptively casual account. No-one knew that degree of detail about southern Arabia even a hundred years after the Book of Mormon was given to the world.

NOTES

1. Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh*, 165-188, especially 167. His updated 2002 summary of the incense trade routes does not show any overland route from Dhofar (Oman) at all. See Nigel Groom, "Trade, Incense and Perfume" in St. John Simpson, ed. *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, 89.
2. See, for example, TPC satellite-based mapping on GSGS 1:500,000 scale charts J-6C and J-7D, published by the Director of Military Survey, UK in 1982. For an example of less detailed, larger scale topographical mapping that highlights the narrow band of plateau terrain east of Nahom clearly, see the 1:3,000,000 scale Bartholomew World Travel Series map of the Arabian Peninsula, nd. It is now possible, of course, to view high-resolution satellite imagery of these locations.
3. Frederick G. Williams 111, "Did Lehi Land in Chile? An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement" in *ReExploring the Book of Mormon*, 57-61, provides analysis of the writing and how it came to be accepted as an inspired statement by Joseph Smith, until modern research forced scholars to examine it more closely.
4. Strabo, *Geography*, Book 16, 4:22-24, and Pliny: *Natural History*, trans. Rackham, (London: Heinemann, 1952), 6:32, 160-162 provide the original references to the Roman incursion of southern Arabia. Nigel Groom refers to the event and briefly correlates the modern locations to the text in his *Frankincense and Myrrh*, 74-76.

For a fuller examination of the issues of geography involved in understanding this window into Arabia's history, see Nigel Groom's "The Roman Expedition into South Arabia" Bulletin of The Society for Arabian Studies 1, (London: The British Academy, February 1996), 5-7. Although questions about dating remain, the Roman event is attested by an undisputed Latin tomb inscription found at Baraqish in Wadi Jauf. See Paolo Costa, "A Latin-Greek Inscription from the Jauf of the Yemen," in PSAS 7 (1977), 69-72 and G. W Bowersock, Roman Arabia (Cambridge MA/ London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 148-153. A second Latin inscription supports the Roman presence in southern Arabia ca. AD 144; see Carl Phillips, Francois Villeneuve, William Facey, "A Latin inscription from South Arabia" in PSAS 34 (2004), 239-250.
5. The idea of some type of servitude to account for the length of the land journey was proposed by S. Kent Brown in "Refining the Spotlight on Lehi and Sariah" *JBMS 15/2* (2006), 44-57.
6. See Francesco G. Fedele, "Neolithic settlement of the eastern Yemen Plateau: an exploration of locational choice and land use" in *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy*

24/1 (May 2013), 44- 50 noting the "very limited sampling" and "considerable unknowns" involved.

7. The photograph by the author of a water pool was taken in April 1992, some 100 miles/160 km inland, in the plateau desert of al-Mahra province, Yemen. Another photograph of standing water, in a gravel desert plain in Oman, appears in Ghazanfar and Fisher, eds. *Vegetation of the Arabian Peninsula*, 188, with notes 187.
8. On the women's role, see Camille Fronk, "Desert Epiphany: Sariah and the Women in 1 Nephi," *JBMS 9/2* (2000), 4-15.
9. The corrected reading for 1 Nephi 17:3 in Royal Skousen's *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part 1: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi – 2 Nephi 10* (2004) is that "ways and means" were provided to Lehi's group by the Lord (emphasis added). This double emphasis in the text clarifies that the Lehi's ability to survive their desert journey was due to multiple factors, not just a single one such as bondage or enslavement.