

Lehi in the Wilderness

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81 new documented evidences that the Book of Mormon is a true history

George Potter and Richard Wellington



Springville, Utah

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*This Book Is Dedicated to
Two Extraordinary Young Men;*

*Their Spiritual and Intellectual Capacities
Are Truly Inspiring.*

To

Nephi, Son of Lehi

and

Joseph Smith Jr.

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*It will be as it ever has been.
The world will prove Joseph Smith
a true prophet by circumstantial evidence.*

The Prophet Joseph Smith
(Translator of the Book of Mormon)



Introduction

We believe we have proven that the first book of Nephi is a true history. Indeed, Nephi's record is the oldest existing record on travel along the Gaza Branch of the ancient Frankincense Trail.

At the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, only 25 percent of the seventeen-hundred-mile course that we believe Lehi took through Arabia had been seen and subsequently described in writing by westerners (Verthema, Wild, and Pitt).¹ The accounts that did exist lacked specifics and were considered unreliable. It is very unlikely that Joseph Smith had access to these vague accounts. So scanty was the West's knowledge of even this northernmost 25 percent of the trail, the distinguished explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton wrote of this area in 1878, "The eastern frontier is still unexplored, and we heard of ruins far in the interior."²

Lord Derby wrote of Burton that "before middle age he had compressed into his life more study, more hardship, and more successful enterprise and adventure, than would have sufficed to fill up

the existence of half a dozen ordinary men."³ By the time of his death, Burton had mastered forty-one languages. If the brilliant and scholarly Burton, who had traveled to Arabia twice before, considered even the part of the trail that was seen by Verthema, Wild, and Pitt unexplored in 1878, what knowledge could Joseph Smith have had about this land in 1829? How could the precocious twenty-four-year-old Smith, who had no formal education and had never left the farming communities of New England, have known about such obscure and nebulous writings, or for that matter, the other 75 percent of the trail which no westerner had ever reported seeing before 1830?

Indeed, until Arabia opened up to westerners after the discovery of oil, little was known about its interior. What makes this book different from all others on this topic is that we have lived and traveled in Arabia for more than twenty-five years. To the reader it will be obvious that we have spent countless hours in the library

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researching this topic, but we can truthfully say that it has only been through our desert exploration that we have come to understand and appreciate the teachings that Nephi has passed on to us. Our expeditions off-road have been the highlights of our research, for it was only when we experienced the hardship of desert driving day after day in the harsh climate and desolate terrain, that we were struck by Lehi and his family's epic struggle. We saw first hand the world in which Nephi lived, and the scenery that he described. To experience the hospitality of the Bedouin as we shared meals in their tents has allowed us a glimpse into a world long passed. These experiences, combined with the thousands of miles of travel, have given us an even stronger conviction that Nephi described a real trail and that we have been privileged to follow it.

Our study took six years to complete. To follow Nephi's words down the ancient Frankincense Trail meant venturing into some of the most remote deserts in the world. During a five-year period, we traveled over fifty thousand miles searching for the Lehi-Nephi trail. We have written this book with a three-fold purpose. First, to provide a window into the world of Nephi as he and his family traveled through Arabia twenty-six hundred years ago; second, to share compelling evidences we discovered that confirm that the Book of Mormon is a true story; and third, to give the reader a chance to enjoy some of the wonderful experiences we had while undertaking our field studies. Because of the multipurpose nature of the book, each chapter takes on a different tone: sometimes a light narrative based on our field trips, and other times a seemingly more scholastic discussion on the historical context of an event Nephi described.

Chapter 1 describes the amazing events that surrounded our discovery of the Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, the site we believe is the Valley of Lemuel. It is a true story of discovery.

Chapter 2 takes the reader back to Jerusalem in 600 B.C. We start by describing the religious and political state-of-affairs in the city

during Lehi's short ministry and describe why and where Lehi fled into the wilderness. Finally we retrace his route to the Valley of Lemuel.

In chapter 3 we discuss why we know that the Wadi Tayyib al-Ism is the Valley of Lemuel. We describe what it was like living in the valley and how the valley's physical characteristics apply to the images found in Lehi's Dream of the Tree of Life.

How did Lehi cross Arabia? There have been many misconceptions published about this journey. Chapter 4 explains how small parties crossed Arabia in antiquity, and it also explains the route Lehi used to reach the Indian Ocean. We will show you how we confirmed this theory by sharing with you how we discovered the next two sites Nephi described after they left the Valley of Lemuel: the place Shazer and the most fertile parts.

In chapter 5 we continue retracing the family's journey through Arabia, ending at the Indian Ocean. We discuss in detail the bow wood Nephi probably used to construct his bow, and take you deep into Yemen where we believe Ishmael died at Nahom.

We break from our explorations of the trail to discuss how life would have been for the men, women and children along the trail during Lehi's time. In chapter 6 we share some of our modern experience in the desert, coupled with accounts of early western explorers in Arabia. After reading this chapter, we believe you will have a new appreciation for the reasons why all but Nephi murmured.

In chapters 7 and 8 we show you the land and place Bountiful—indeed, the very harbor where Nephi built his ship. Such a claim of new discovery requires a more thorough discussion and, consequently, a more reasoned and scholarly approach.

Finally, we devote the last two chapters to the great men who inspired this book: Nephi, the son of Lehi, and Joseph Smith Jr., who brought it to our attention. We hope that this book will provide for you, as it did for us, a richer appreciation for their contribution to the Book of Mormon.

When we started this project if we had realized the time, effort and difficulties that would have been involved I am not sure that we would have continued with it. One of our greatest frustrations was our inability to get our work taken seriously by LDS scholars. With the exception of Professor S. Kent Brown of Brigham Young University, who was very supportive of our efforts, our work seemed to meet with almost universal disapproval among the community of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) at BYU, who we sent along all of our work. At the time we commenced our project FARMS' position was that Lehi traveled the length of Arabia along the west coast and then crossed the mountains of the Hadramaut to arrive at wadi Sayq. The map on their website of the time illustrated this. After many years of discussion with them about the route and our findings, we were very pleased when we read Professor S. Kent Brown's chapter in FARMS' book *Echoes and Evidences of The Book of Mormon*, published at the very time we were preparing the final draft for this book. In it Professor Brown includes a map of Lehi's trail, which shows a complete departure from the one previously held by FARMS. A route showed Lehi heading east from Jerusalem to travel the Way of the Wilderness to arrive at wadi Tayyib al Ism, our proposed site for the Valley of Lemuel. The route then travels along the Frankincense Trail, our preferred route to southern Arabia, and turns east at Ramlat Sabatayn, where we feel is the most probable location for Nahom. The route east heads between the mountains and the desert, as we propose in this book, and ends at Dhofar. Even Khor Rori, our suggested site for the place Bountiful where Nephi built his ship, is included. You can imagine our delight. FARMS had made a complete about turn and now supported our model almost in its entirety. We are excited now that Latter-day Saints have a logical, physically possible and historically proven route by which Lehi could have taken his family to Bountiful, which is in

total harmony with the record we find in Nephi's account. We do not believe that anyone on earth could have known all of the intricate details of what Nephi describes unless they had traveled that route themselves nor do we consider it possible, for one moment, that Joseph Smith, or any man alive in his day, could have made it up. The journey described in the first book of the Book of Mormon is neither the product of a fruitful imagination nor the sum total of the world's knowledge of Arabia in Joseph Smith's time. We firmly believe that it could only have been revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith from on high.

Notes

1. Freeth and Winston, *Explorers of Arabia*.
2. Burton, *Gold-Mines of Midian*, 105.
3. Freeth and Winston, *Explorers of Arabia*, 121.



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*[If] any man shall demand of me
cause of my voyage,
certainly I can show no better reason
than the ardent desire of knowledge,
which has moved many men to see the world
and the miracles of God therein.*

Lodovico Verthema
(First known westerner to enter Arabia)



Chapter One

Discovering the Valley of Lemuel

Call it serendipity, providence, or fate, but it seems some invisible hand has directed our course from the beginning. It all started one hot May morning in 1995 when we set out with two LDS friends, Tom Culler and Craig Thorsted, for the land of Midian in northwest Saudi Arabia. We thought of the trip as another desert campout, but with one small variation—our two trail mates were determined to find Mount Sinai. We were amused but discounted the possibility of finding the mountain. Thus, we drove into the desert naïvely thinking that the trip would have no impact on our lives. We were very wrong.

It required twenty hours driving just to cross Arabia, east to west, to reach our search area. Tom and Craig were excited to be back in the northwest corner of Arabia in the land called Midian (see LDS Bible maps). They rejected the popular belief that Mount Sinai is found in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. Instead, they believed the Apostle Paul was correct when he wrote that Mount Sinai was located in Arabia (Gal. 4:25).

Over the last 150 years, several explorers have reported finding a mountain in Midian that had many ancient monuments, hinting that it was the real mount Sinai. Tom and Craig had made several previous attempts to find the candidate for the sacred mountain. We assumed that this trip, like the ones before it, meant four days of off-roading, a chance to climb some mountains, and a long trip back home talking about how we would find the mountain the next time.

Entering Midian, we saw that the western horizon was dotted with hundreds of mountains. Any one of these could have been the mountain Tom and Craig were hoping to find. We were now certain that our chances of finding the mountain of Moses were small. However, Tom and Craig remained optimistic that this time would be different. Tom had a friend, who had a friend, who had met someone, who lived in the area and knew the Bedouins near Jabal al-Lawz, the mountain we thought was possibly the one they were looking for. If anyone knew where the ruins were, it would be the Bedouins who grazed their goats in these mountains.



Jabal Al Lawz. This peak has been named as the probable site for Mount Horeb (Sinai) in Midian. In fact, the actual Midian Mount Sinai is about nine miles to the south of Jebal al Lawz.

Fate! To everyone's surprise on our arrival in Tabuk, the nearest town to our search area, the friend's friend's colleague was waiting for us. This "city Saudi" confirmed that he knew the Bedouins in the area. Besides, even if he could not find his friends, this Saudi spoke enough English to function as a translator. After Tom explained to the Saudi that we wanted to explore the mountain Jabal al-Lawz, we followed him out of town in his Toyota Landcruiser.

An hour's drive northwest from Tabuk, we left the paved road. The guide stopped at a small village and picked up some of his Bedu buddies. First the Bedouins took us up a narrow wadi (valley) bordered on each side by towering sandstone cliffs. After about three miles they stopped at the base of one of the cliffs. Here were several wild fig trees growing next to two small ponds. At first it appeared to be a spring, but to our surprise the ponds were fed by water dripping from an overhang into the pools. One of our newly adopted Bedouin guides proclaimed through our translator that "Here is where Musa [Arabic for Moses] struck the rock and water came out." "Interesting, but not very convincing," we thought. We had heard of other places in Arabia where sandstone cliffs absorb the scant rainfall, and then slowly release it near its base.

Next, our small party stopped at a Bedouin camp to pick up rifles in case these Bedouin young men spotted wolves or rabbits. The tribesmen hunted both animals for food. Here, they were joined by another Toyota Landcruiser with an older Bedouin at the wheel and a concerned looking goat staring at us through the back window. Both driver and goat had long beards. We agreed that it must be a very pious goat.

Next, our little caravan of four-wheel drives and one four-legged beast started up the leading candidate for the Arabian Sinai, *Jabal* (mountain) *al-Lawz*. Using a steep dirt construction road we climbed to the nearly 8,000-foot summit. Jabal al-Lawz is the tallest mountain in Midian. Unfortunately we found that the entire top of the mountain had been turned into a massive construction

project. Its peak had been removed to make a foundation for a U.S.-built radar and command center. The defense site would eventually cost some five hundred million U.S. dollars. Again, the city Saudi had an announcement. “This is the mountain of Musa.” We were not impressed and left the mountain, realizing that if it had been Mount Sinai, it could no longer reveal its monuments.

Nephi’s “Borders”

We learned from the Arabs that the name of the mountains in northwest Arabia, the *Hejaz*, meant the “borders.” In the Semitic language, the words for *mountain* and *borders* share a common derivation. That is, the Hebrew word *gebul* means *border*. *Gebul* cognates with Arabic *jabal* (*jebel*, *djebel*), which means *mountain*.¹ Later we read that linguist and historian Hugh W. Nibley had published this fact many years earlier. Subsequently, Dr. Nibley informed us that also in the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian languages the word *borders* meant *mountains*.²

Atop of Jabel Al-Lawz we could see just why this range of mountains was called the borders. Al-Lawz is just one peak in a great range of mountains that runs down the entire western shoreline of Arabia, dividing the interior desert valleys from the shoreline plain, or *Thema*. We knew that the Thema ran the entire Red Sea shoreline of Saudi Arabia, but from the summit we could see that there were two mountain ranges in Midian. Both ranges ran north to south; one, which included al-Lawz ran about twenty miles inland from the coast, and the other, a shoreline range of mountains or borders that ran along the Gulf of Aqaba.



Looking north up Wadi Ifal. To the north the mountain range splits. The mountains to the far right continue down the length of the west of Arabia (“near the Red Sea”), the mountains to the left continue down into the sea (“nearer the Red Sea”).

Our minds started wandering from the story of Moses to the history that was written by Nephi. Midian is also the place where Book of Mormon scholars Nibley, Lynn, and Hope Hilton had determined that the Valley of Lemuel should be found. From historical and Biblical texts, they realized that “the wilderness” in Lehi’s time was Arabia. They argued that the Valley of Lemuel should be found a three-days camel ride south of the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba, “the fountain of the Red Sea” (1 Ne. 2:9, footnote).

Good fortune! Had it not been for the construction of the road to the top of Jabel Al-Lawz only a few months before, we probably would never have seen such an all-embracing vista of Midian. From



The near-lifeless coast of Midian.

here we could survey all of western Midian. We could see the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. The valley below, wadi I'fal, seemed bone-dry. The wadi separated two mountain ranges of Midian. The entire view was magnificent, but the feature that seemed to forge its image in our minds was the shoreline mountain range to the west. "It was just like Nephi had written," we thought. "There are two mountain ranges (borders), one near the Red Sea (Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea), and one nearer the Red Sea" (1 Ne. 2:5). The shoreline range started about forty miles south of the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba and continued for another forty miles to where it ended about twenty miles north of the southern end of the Gulf.

The Book of Mormon states that Lehi "traveled in the wilderness in the borders which were nearer the Red Sea," and that they camped in a valley that was in the borders (mountains). Finally the valley Lehi called "Lemuel" opened upon the Red Sea (1 Ne. 2:8). How could Nephi's record have been any more explicit? Indeed, there are two mountain ranges near the Red Sea. The shoreline mountains to the west must have a canyon that opened upon the Red Sea. Now, we began to be impressed. The valley of Lemuel had to be somewhere in the shoreline mountains.

What Did This Mean to Lehi and His Family?

As we started down the mountain, we realized for the first time just how demanding living conditions were in this area of Arabia. T. S. Lawrence (of Arabia) wrote of how the sun can kill a man in this land. "Not a long death," he mused later. "Even for the very strongest, a second day in summer was all—but very painful, for thirst was an active malady: a fear and a panic which tore at the brain and reduced the bravest man to a stumbling, babbling maniac in an hour or two; and then the sun killed him."

What a challenge Lehi faced when he brought his family into this barren desert. They were not Bedouins bred to survive in the

desert. They were a coddled wealthy family from the land of Jerusalem. They were accustomed to a life of luxury. One look at this nearly lifeless landscape, and one can see why the privileged Laman and Lemuel thought they would perish.

Initially, it would seem, they were seeking for a place to hide and perhaps wait out the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. Their first need was to find a source of drinking water. No wonder Lehi built an altar and gave thanks to the Lord when he found a flowing river (1 Ne. 2:6–7, 9).

However, from the summit of Jabel Al-Lawz all we saw was a sun-baked landscape. The mountains and valleys were naked of life. How could Lehi have found a river in this land? Without a river of water, how can the Book of Mormon claim to be an accurate historical record? Actually, the lack of a river of running water in Arabia has long been a criticism of the Book of Mormon. Hogarth argues that Arabia "probably never had a true river in all its immense area."³ The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Agriculture and Water, with the assistance of the U.S. Geological Service (U.S.G.S.), spent forty-four years surveying the kingdom's water resources. Their study consisted of seismic readings, surface and aerial surveys, and even land satellite photo analysis. They concluded that "Saudi Arabia may be the world's largest country without any perennial rivers or streams."⁴

Scientific research has shown that the climate in this part of the world was as arid in c. 600 B.C. as it is today. Lehi had to find water for his family in this riverless land, and the Book of Mormon tells us that he did.

We know that the river Lehi named Laman was only a "desert river," a small stream. Hugh Nibley notes, "The expression 'river of water' is used only for small local streams."⁵ Lehi gave the river a name, so it probably had no name by which it was known. It is hard to imagine that any significant flow of water in the Near East would go unnamed. This would imply that the river did not amount to

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much. For this reason Nibley suggested, “It [the River of Laman] cannot therefore have been an important stream,”⁶ but it only needed to be a small stream to have sustained life for the prophet’s family in the desert.

Finding the river of Laman would have been a faith promoting experience and a great blessing to Lehi. Finding the river today would seem to fly in the face of critics of the Book of Mormon and the forty-four year survey of Arabia by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Bedouin Hospitality

The older Bedu driver, Ibrahim, with the pious goat, turned out to be the father of one of our Bedouin guides. He had a noble appearance and character, even by Bedouin standards. Typical of the older generation of rugged Bedu herdsman, his body was lean and muscular. According to Bedouin tradition, the character of a man is judged by one trait alone, his hospitality. Ibrahim wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass without showing his generosity. We were almost to the bottom of the mountain when Ibrahim turned off the construction road and headed off into a wadi following only a rough Bedu trail. Before we knew what was taking place, he had the goat out of the truck; said the traditional Muslim prayer, and slaughtered the goat. He then commenced preparing a Bedouin feast.

By the time the other Bedouins had collected dry brush and started a fire, Ibrahim had prepared the goat, mixed bread dough and had mint tea in a kettle. As we ate, we talked to Ibrahim through a translator. We learned that he had four wives and twenty-five children. After hearing of such a brood, for once in his life, George felt that his own large family was only a modest lot. This was a probable explanation for why this Bedu patriarch was such a hard worker. George and Ibrahim talked of religion and verses in the Qur’an. Old Ibrahim was convinced that George was a Muslim. “No, I am a



Tom Culler and Bedu guide.

Mormon,” came his reply. The Bedouin patriarch became even more confused when George told him his great grandfather had four wives. In total sincerity, Ibrahim took advantage of a marketing opportunity. It seems he had a surplus of daughters he had to marry off. “If you can have so many wives, I will give you one of my daughters to marry. There are only two conditions, you have to become a Muslim, and you must live with me here in the desert.”

George pondered just how this might go over when he got home. “Oh, honey, look what I found in the desert. Oh, and sweetheart, we’re all moving in with her father!” George declined the offer, but mentioned that Craig was unmarried and would love to live in the desert. Ibrahim looked pleased and headed over to Craig.

Apparently, Ibrahim had at least one daughter who was proving hard to place. He made Craig a special offer he almost could not refuse. “Oh for you, I will let you marry one of my daughters. You



Al Bada'a sits nestled in the mountains. This town was known anciently as Midian, the hometown of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, the high priest of Midian.

Leki in the Wilderness

do not even have to become a Muslim. However, you must do it our traditional way . . . you can not see her before the wedding night.”

After dinner the old Bedouin provided us with an amazing demonstration of marksmanship. With his old Chinese rifle, steady body, and sharp eye, he hit target after target. After the feast, we said good-bye to our new Bedouin friends and set up camp before dark.

Providence! From an anthropological standpoint, the day had been a wonderful outing. However, we did not find the mount Sinai candidate we sought. We woke bright and early the next morning and took down our tents. We enjoyed a wilderness breakfast and looked forward to a delightful day in the desert, chasing an apparently nonexistent Mount Sinai candidate. However, that day we found the target of our search, possibly the very mountain that today is dedicated as a temple, but the real jewel of our trip came the following day.

Tom had returned to the Eastern Province while we drove to the oasis town of al-Bada’a to explore the Well of Jethro, the priest of Midian. To obtain authorization to enter the well site, we stopped at the mayor’s office. The mayor sent one of his supervisors to show us the site and to explain the Mosaic history of the town. The supervisor was justly proud of the city’s history, and he appealed to the Qur’an to relate the stories of Moses, Jethro, and the town of al-Bada’a. Complimenting us on our knowledge of the Qur’an, he said that if we were really interested in Moses, we should visit the Waters of Musa (Moses) near Maqna. Maqna is a small, isolated village that lies twenty miles west of al-Bada’a on the Gulf of Aqaba.

The official explained to us that, according to local tradition, Maqna had been the first camp of Moses after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. He said it was at the Waters of Moses that the Prophet Moses had touched his staff to the rock and twelve springs, one for each tribe, gushed

forth, one for each tribe (see Qur’an 7:160). The official feared, however, that the springs might have dried up because in recent years the government had placed pumps on all the natural wells in Midian.

When we reached Maqna we stopped at a restaurant to inquire about the springs. Americans must be a rare sight in this remote village, for our truck was immediately surrounded by curious Arab children who shouted, “Ameriki.” The supervisor in al-Bada’a had given us the name of a contact man in Maqna who would show us the Waters. It seemed that everyone knew the man, but he was away from the village.

We decided to inquire at the first “official” building we could find. We came to a large complex that turned out to be a Saudi coast guard station. From the gate we were led to the captain’s salon for an interview. After a long series of questions, the captain ended his inquiry and granted us permission to visit the Waters of Moses. We learned from him that the place was twelve miles to the north, along a restricted coast guard patrol road. He gave us written permission and promised a military escort.

It wasn’t until our fourth trip to the area, three and a half years later, that we finally discovered that the Waters of Moses we had heard about while we were in al-Bada’a were actually located at Maqna itself. By a turn of events, the captain had directed us to the wrong spot farther north along the coast, a location that we wouldn’t have visited on our own since the coast road there is off limits and guarded by several coast guard stations and constant patrols. Some may say that it was by pure luck that we came, not to the traditional Waters of Moses, but to another source that we might easily never have seen. We see the experience as providential.

As we drove north from Maqna, the scenery was typical of what we had seen along the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea—lifeless sand plains and barren rocky valleys. The landscape

reminded us of Moses' words: "that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water" (Deut. 8:15). Nephi's mention of a river valley, possibly with fruit trees, seed-bearing plants, and grain, seemed totally out of place (see 1 Ne. 2:6; 8:1). Yet, this shoreline is the general area where the valley of Lemuel should be found.

Eight miles north of Maqna, we came to the southern end of the shoreline mountain range. Here the mountains seemed to drop directly into the waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. There was just enough room for the coast guard dirt road to pass between the giant cliffs on the right and the watery gulf on the left. We followed the narrow road for another four miles, with waves occasionally breaking over our path. Rounding the base of a cliff, we came upon a truly spectacular sight. A magnificent narrow canyon just ahead of us ended in a palm-lined cove. The brilliant blue shades of the clear gulf waters and the sky framed the scene. We later learned that the name of the valley was the wadi Tayyib al-Ism.

We decided to walk up the spectacular wadi or canyon. After three and three-quarter miles it opened into a beautiful oasis upper valley with several wells and three large groves of date palm trees. These wells are known as the waters of Moses. However, what caught George's interest most was the stream that started in the canyon near its upper end and ran down the wadi virtually all the way to the sea. From the vegetation in the valley and the erosion on the rocks, it appeared that the small desert river flows continually night and day, year after year. At the time the Book of Mormon was first published, the claim that a river ran in arid northwestern Arabia could not be checked. Western explorers did not venture into this remote area until well after 1830.⁷

Yet Lehi spoke of "a river of water" that "emptied into the Red Sea" and that was "continually running" (1 Ne. 2:6, 9). Book of Mormon scholars had long realized that the river of Laman was



The spectacular first view of wadi Tayyib al-Ism, the Valley of Lemuel, as it opens into the "fountain of the Red Sea" or Gulf of Aqaba.



The “River of Laman” winds its way through the “Valley of Lemuel.”

but a small local stream. George surmised that we were walking in the Valley of Lemuel.

From Serendipity to Years of Hard Work

We left and drove through the night to get back to work the next morning. We had no problem staying awake. Craig would be leaving Arabia for a good three weeks, so it was up to George to prove that we had found the Valley of Lemuel. Furthermore, George believed that we had visited one other Book of Mormon place-name on our search of Mount Sinai. Northwest Arabia, the second most arid region of Arabia, is a desolate place. On our way to Midian we had driven for hours through the land without seeing a single farm. Then we came to one striking exception, the valley of Ula two hundred miles south of Tabuk. Nephi wrote of having traveled through the “most fertile parts” of the wilderness (1 Ne. 16:14). Running through the valley of Ula were the most fertile farmlands in northwest Arabia, and through these farmlands ran the Frankincense Trail, which in Nephi’s times was the only overland route travelers could use to travel down western Arabia to the Indian Ocean.

The implications of this second discovery were profound. For the previous fifty years, Book of Mormon scholars had painted the picture of Lehi and his family either wandering down Arabia hiding from the Arabs as they journeyed, or forging an uncharted trail down the shoreline plain of the Red Sea. If one reviews the maps on the BYU/FARMS web site of 1997, one will see that this was clearly the way of thinking before we started our work in earnest.

We returned home, realizing that we needed expert help. We believed with fervor that we had discovered the Valley of Lemuel, yet who would believe us? At that time we didn’t even have photographs. It would be even harder to study the entire Frankincense Trail to its end at the Indian Ocean. The trail was over two thousand miles



The old town at al Ula. This was known as Dedan in Old Testament times.

long, and wound through some of the most forbidding deserts on earth. George needed much more evidence, and he needed a partner.

It didn't take long before George had a full partner in his quest to find Lehi's trail. His bishop, Richard Wellington, received a new calling to be a counselor in the stake presidency. His new calling gave Richard just enough time to squeeze in the roll of co-explorer. Richard was an enthusiastic supporter of George's ideas about Lehi's trail, and better still, he brought to the team three vital resources: first, his keen knowledge of the Book of Mormon; second, years of experience in exploring the wilderness of Africa and Arabia; and third, experience photographing birds in the wild. Now George had the opportunity to document Lehi's trail on film.

Richard was born in England and got used to traveling at an early age. His parents joined the Church when he was three years old and living in Germany. After graduating from college, he went to South Africa, and he finally ended up in Saudi Arabia, where he had worked for the last eighteen years. His numerous desert trips sparked an interest in the ancient history of Arabia, which over the years, had taken him over much of the Peninsula visiting archeological sites.

Richard's background complemented George's. George first stepped into the shoes of an amateur explorer during his LDS mission to Peru and Bolivia. His mission from 1969 to 1971 took him to the heights of the Andes, the land of the Incas and several other ancient civilizations. He had the privilege of serving in such archaeologically rich areas as Cuzco, Lake Titicaca, and Trujillo. Like many LDS missionaries called to Central and South America, he and his companions spent many preparation days exploring ancient ruins.

Our Research Methods

We readily admit that we are not scholars of history or archaeology, nor do we masquerade as linguists. However, we have important

resources that the armchair academics do not. First, we have ready access to Arabia. Together we have lived in Arabia twenty-seven years. We have the wilderness skills to explore Arabia's dangerous deserts. Second, we live and work among the Arabs and hear firsthand their history and legends. Third, we have available a rich pool of technical experts and resources to draw upon. The expatriate community in Arabia is a treasure chest of geologists, desert explorers, old map collectors, and Arabists.

Before each field trip, we spent what seemed to be endless hours in libraries and on the Internet studying the history, geography, tribes, etc., of each area we were to enter. Often, we would work separately taking the same piece of the text of First Nephi, independently contact leading experts on the subject via the Internet, search the racks of the libraries, and then sit down together to discuss our independent conclusions. Only then, with a set of thoroughly researched assumptive criteria, did we head to the desert to begin our field studies. The five years of our work together proved fascinating and yielded numerous new evidences that Joseph Smith truly translated an ancient record. We commenced the Preface by stating that we believe we have proven that the Book of Mormon is a true history. It is now our pleasure to show you why.

Notes

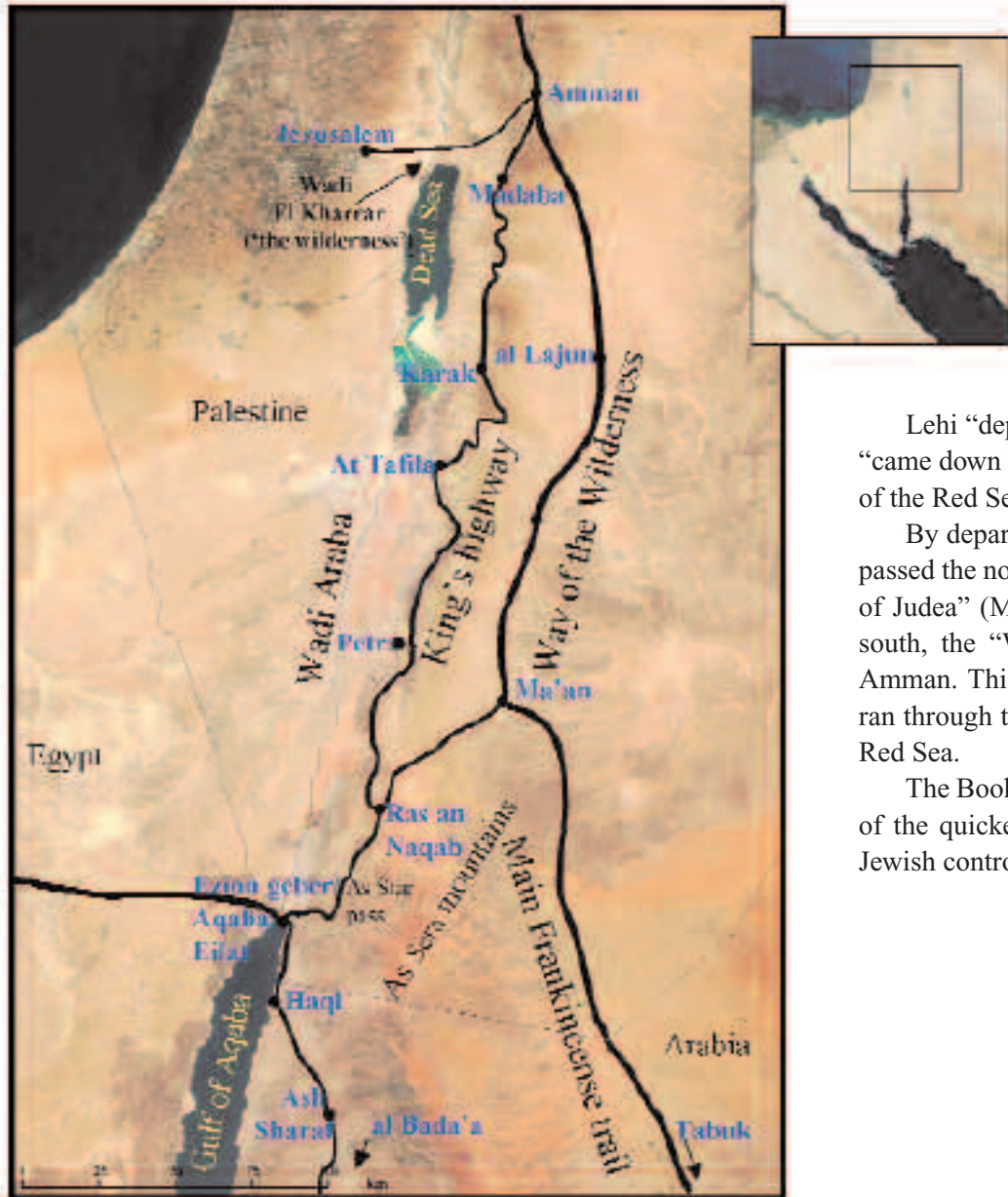
1. Anonymous F.A.R.M.S. review notes to the author, July 1998. The author of this critique of George's early work noted, "But the Hebrew word is used of non-mountainous areas as well, though its origin may have been in reference to mountain barriers." Also reviewer's notes from F.A.R.M.S./BYU to authors, 1999.

2. Conversation between Hugh Nibley and George Potter at Brigham Young University, August 13, 2001.

3. As cited in Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 79–80.

4. Ministry of Agriculture and Waters, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Water Atlas of Saudi Arabia*, xv.

5. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 256.
6. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 82, 83.
7. Taylor, *Traveling the Sands*, 19–31.



Lehi “departed into the wilderness” (1 Ne. 2:4) and “came down by the borders” (mountains) near the shore of the Red Sea (1 Ne. 2:5).

By departing east from Jerusalem, Lehi would have passed the northern tip of the Dead Sea, the “wilderness of Judea” (Matt. 3:1), reaching the main route leading south, the “Way of the Wilderness” somewhere near Amman. This route led to the King’s Highway, which ran through the Se’ir mountains to Ezion geber and the Red Sea.

The Book of Mormon provides a perfect description of the quickest and safest route out of the land under Jewish control and to the Gulf of Aqaba.