

## WAS LEHI A CARAVANEER?

it appears that he had sufficient land to grow crops and plant trees of various sorts.

### **LEHI: METALWORKER?**

But we must still deal with the question of how Lehi acquired his wealth. As noted above from Nibley's study, it is not reasonable to believe that Lehi could have accumulated wealth from agricultural pursuits. Caravaneering is Nibley's recourse as the only reasonable means by which the prophet could have become rich. But another possibility suggests itself. There is evidence to show that Lehi and his family were craftsmen and artisans—probably metalworkers.<sup>54</sup>

For example, we have Nephi's keen interest in the sword of Laban when he encounters him drunk on the streets (1 Nephi 4:9). Nephi's steel bow (1 Nephi 16:18) might also be an indication of his occupation. (His inability to repair the bow in the desert could be explained by either the lack of iron ore in the region or by the fact that the Lord had forbidden them to make fires, as noted in 1 Nephi 17:12.) And if Laban was somehow related to Lehi, as Nibley first suggested,<sup>55</sup> then this might be further evidence that the family was involved in metal-working, for Laban was the custodian of the brass plates containing the scriptures.

When the Lord told Nephi, in the land of Bountiful, to build a ship, he had to give detailed instructions on how to do it (1 Nephi 17:8; 18:1-4). But there is no record that Nephi had to ask how to prepare the metal tools with which he built the ship. Rather, he simply asked the Lord where he could find the "ore to

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<sup>54</sup> In the Near East, sons typically enter into the same occupation as their fathers. Hence, the occupation pursued by Nephi can be reasonably expected to be that of his father as well.

<sup>55</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 97. If Lehi and Laban are not related, then one is left to wonder why Lehi's genealogy was on the plates in Laban's possession. See 1 Nephi 5:14-16, where we also note that both were descendants of Joseph.

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molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship.” He then constructed a bellows, lit a fire and fabricated the tools (1 Nephi 17:8-11, 16). Nephi stressed that he built the ship according to the way shown him by the Lord, but makes no similar statement regarding the smelting of ore and the making of the bellows and tools for building the ship (1 Nephi 18:1-2). Furthermore, while his brothers mocked his efforts to build a ship, they said not a (recorded) word about his abilities as a smith (1 Nephi 17:17).

Further evidence for Nephi’s metal-working skills came after the group’s arrival in the New World. He reported that they found “all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper” (1 Nephi 18:25). Nephi prepared the plates of ore from which the Book of Mormon ultimately developed, smelting the ore and forming the plates themselves.<sup>56</sup> He also manufactured “many swords” based on the pattern of the weapon he had taken from Laban in Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:14), though we cannot be sure that these were metal swords. The full range of his talents is explained in the verses that follow this entry:

And I did teach my people to build buildings,  
and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron,  
and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of  
gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which  
were in great abundance. And I, Nephi, did build  
a temple . . . I, Nephi, did cause my people to be  
industrious, and to labor with their hands. (2  
Nephi 5:15-17)

The descendants of Lehi’s colony found “all manner of gold . . . and of silver, and of precious ore of every kind; and there were also curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it; and thus they did become rich” (Helaman 6:11; see Jacob 1:16; 2:12). One of Nephi’s descendants, Moroni, complained that

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<sup>56</sup> 1 Nephi 19:1-5; 2 Nephi 5:30-31. In 1 Nephi 1:17, he wrote of the “plates which I have made with mine own hands.”



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he was running out of “room upon the plates,” and lamented, “and ore I have none” (Mormon 8:5). This implies that he knew what to do with the ore.

John W. Welch has suggested in private conversations with the author that the skepticism of Laman and Lemuel upon the discovery of the Liahona or compass outside Lehi’s tent one morning (1 Nephi 16:10) may be yet another indication of Nephi’s metalworking skills. Lehi’s elder sons seem not to be impressed by this marvelous instrument. Welch has proposed that this may be because they thought the brass ball-like device had been manufactured by their brother in an attempt to convince them that they were doing the right thing by following their father into the wilderness. He notes that 1 Nephi 16:38 refers to Nephi’s using “cunning crafts.” If this suggestion is correct, it would explain why Alma was so insistent in his declaration that no human hand could have fabricated the Liahona (Alma 37:38-39).

If Lehi and his family were metalworkers (living on a plot of land sufficiently large to grow crops as well),<sup>57</sup> then the source of their wealth is readily explained. From Biblical passages (2 Kings 24:11-15; Jeremiah 24:1; 29:2), as well as the Assyrian and Babylonian documents of that era,<sup>58</sup> we have learned that craftsmen and smiths were considered in Lehi’s day to belong to the upper class.

S. Kent Brown has suggested that Lehi’s family were bondservants to one or more Arabian clans during their sojourn in

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<sup>57</sup> While it is true that there are and have been nomadic smiths in the Near East, yet the evidence of some Biblical passages is that there were urbanized artisans of various types in the time of Lehi.

<sup>58</sup> For examples of texts showing the importance of smiths in ancient times, see James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Texts, Relating to the Old Testament*, pp. 269, 292, 556. He cites two further texts in which smiths are listed with royalty (*ibid.*, 293). Other artisans were likewise important. For example, the Babylonian texts that list the food allocations given to the captive king of Judah also list the food given to foreign carpenters who had been taken to Babylon (*ibid.*, 308).

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the desert.<sup>59</sup> But it seems unlikely that a group of caravaners could have been of much use in Arabia unless they actually traveled elsewhere with the caravans—travel that is never suggested by the Book of Mormon. Moreover, any Arabians already involved in the caravan trade would likely have been much more skilled at it than Lehi. On the other hand, desert nomads could clearly have made use of the skills of metalworkers. Indeed, itinerant metalworkers have long been known in the Middle East.<sup>60</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Having presented all the evidence then available to him, Nibley wrote, “Put all these things together, and you have a perfectly consistent and convincing picture of Lehi the merchant.”<sup>61</sup> As noted above, however, the picture is not entirely consistent or convincing today. Of course, there is no question as to the importance of trade in Lehi’s day, nor the relevance of comparing Bedouin lifestyle with accounts found in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Indeed, these are important topics, and Hugh Nibley has not only led the discussion of Lehi’s Old World ties, but has far outdistanced other scholars in the field. But even the inestimable value of his contributions to Book of Mormon studies cannot close the door on further research, as he himself has often said.

That research suggests that Lehi was, in fact, a sedentary resident of the land of Jerusalem, living on a plot of land large

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<sup>59</sup> S. Kent Brown, “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (fall 1997): 206-17. See also chapter 4, “Sojourn, Dwell, and Stay: Terms of Servitude,” in his *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon*.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the discussion in William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology & the Religion of Israel*, 96, 121, 197 (note 4), 198 (notes 5 and 7). This issue will be dealt with in greater detail in the author’s forthcoming book, “The House of Jethro: A History of the Kenites.”

<sup>61</sup> Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 47.