

## THE WRONG PLACE FOR LEHI'S TRAIL AND THE VALLEY OF LEMUEL

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“They’re digging in the wrong place!” So goes the famous line from the classic film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The simultaneous exclamation of Indiana Jones and his Egyptian friend Salah (played respectively by Harrison Ford and John Rhys-Davies), the line is a favorite of long-time Near Eastern archaeologists like myself. We never admit to students or laymen that we enjoy the movie—we prefer to appear detached and scientific to those whom we lecture. Instead we watch it in secret, usually on a weekend evening off from the exhausting tasks of our annual excavations. My latest viewing was just last summer, at a private gathering of old friends (all crack field archaeologists themselves) in Jerusalem. Cold drinks and kosher pizza in hand, we again cheered the unlikely adventures of Hollywood’s most famous explorer. And we always laugh out loud together every time we hear that line: “They’re digging in the wrong place!” We have all experienced what it is like to dig in the wrong place.

Which brings us to the subject at hand—the 2003 book *Lehi in the Wilderness* by George Potter and Richard Wellington. *Lehi in the Wilderness* is an ambitious and handsomely illustrated attempt to

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determine the exact route of Lehi's trail from Jerusalem to Bountiful and to locate precisely the various camps of his party as described in the Book of Mormon text. Potter and Wellington present their findings in a lively and personalized narrative that relates their travels, adventures, and learning experiences in various locations around the Arabian peninsula. Their story is engaging and is also handsomely illustrated with color photographs and maps. But when it comes to some of the sites that, they conclude, were connected with Lehi's journey, to put it simply, "they're digging in the wrong place."

Potter and Wellington were expatriates (American and British respectively) living in Saudi Arabia in 1995 when their Book of Mormon story began. Wellington was an employee of ARAMCO (the Arabian American Oil Company), and Potter was head of his own financial consulting company. Chapter 1 of their adventure takes place "one hot May morning" (p. 1) when they set out into the Saudi desert in search of the so-called Arabian Mount Sinai—Jebel al-Lawz. "Fate" (p. 2) and "providence" (p. 8) combine to lead them to a wadi (desert valley) called Tayyib al-Isim, where they find a small stream of water running through the narrow canyon. Almost immediately, "George surmised that we were walking in the Valley of Lemuel" (p. 10).

The chance discovery of the valley of Lemuel inspired the authors to push forward with further Book of Mormon research. In chapter 2 they visit the modern kingdom of Jordan, where they decide that after leaving Jerusalem, Lehi crossed the Jordan river and traveled south from Amman to the Gulf of Aqaba. His route was not via the Arabah valley nor the famous King's Highway (preferred by other Book of Mormon researchers), but along a desert road much further east, which they identify as the biblical "Way of the Wilderness" of 2 Samuel 15:23.

In chapter 3 the authors return to Tayyib al-Isim, where they explain, point by point, why they think this particular wadi has to have been the valley of Lemuel. A detailed description of the features of the site is compared to the Book of Mormon narrative. They even manage to find an "altar of stones" at the summit of a hill near the valley, just like the one built by Lehi. Potter and Wellington suggest that such altars were

dedicated in a special ceremony they call a “*Nephi* ceremony,” which is “perhaps . . . a clue as to the Hebrew origins of Nephi’s name” (p. 40).

Rolling down desert highways and byways in their Land Rover, the authors proceed to discover what they believe is more of the exact route Lehi traveled and most of the exact places where he camped, from chapter 4 (“Lehi’s Trail to Southern Arabia”) on to chapter 9 (“Discovering Nephi’s Harbor”). Having mapped every mile of the Book of Mormon’s Old World journey, they conclude with “A Tribute to Nephi” (chapter 10) and “A Tribute to Joseph Smith, the Translator” (chapter 11), followed by an impressive list of the “81 new, documented evidences” they claim to have brought to light.

This book is a remarkable read. From the outset, however, it was clear that theories proposed by the authors run counter to textual descriptions in Nephi’s own record. In my opinion, entire chapters of *Lehi in the Wilderness* are unreliable efforts at mapping out the movements of Lehi’s party after leaving Jerusalem. In spite of their best efforts and noble intentions, Potter and Wellington miss the mark in terms of some of the most important places Nephi described. Quite simply, “they’re digging in the wrong place.”

This is not to say that *Lehi in the Wilderness* is without merit. I learned valuable things from reading about Potter and Wellington’s experiences in the Arabian desert. I am convinced that a couple of chapters in the book should become required reading for students researching the topic of Lehi in Arabia. Even if their exact places can be questioned, features of desert life they describe are bound to have been part of Lehi’s experience. Additionally, their energy, enthusiasm, forthrightness, and obvious conviction that the Book of Mormon is both spiritually true and factually accurate are all positive aspects of the book.

Although I address areas where I feel *Lehi in the Wilderness* goes wrong, it is only fair to note where the authors get it right. Chapter 9, “Discovering Nephi’s Harbor,” is a fascinating treatment. I have studied and taught the story of Nephi building his ship hundreds of times, but I had never considered some of the issues they explore in relating what would have been involved in building a craft large enough and sturdy

enough to take a party of more than fifty people and all the provisions they would have needed on a long ocean voyage. I tend to doubt their assertion that Lehi's party brought local Arabians with them across the Pacific, and I remain unconvinced that their Khor Rori location in Oman, east of Salalah, was in fact Nephi's ship-building harbor. But the research into the details of ship building offered in chapter 9 is worth the book's pricey cost.

With regard to Lehi's trail across Arabia, three notable researchers preceded Potter and Wellington in exploring possible Book of Mormon locations on the peninsula—Lynn Hilton, Warren Aston, and Kent Brown. The treatment they receive in the book is uneven. Brown's opinions (and his support of the authors' efforts) are mentioned on numerous occasions. But Aston's ground-breaking work on the locations of both Bountiful and Nahom is barely noted. And Hilton's pioneering efforts to identify the Arabian trail of Lehi are not mentioned. These deficits are difficult to defend in terms of giving credit where credit is due. Potter and Wellington also seem to have a less than glowing opinion of FARMS (with the exception of Brown), judging from their complaints about the organization in their introduction. "Our work seemed to meet with almost universal disapproval among the community of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) at BYU" (p. xiii). Perhaps some of the reasons for this perceived "disapproval" on the part of a very capable community of Book of Mormon scholars lies in the weaknesses of their models.

Before discussing what I consider to be some errors in *Lehi in the Wilderness*, I grant a disclaimer of my own: I have no on-the-ground experience in Arabia proper. My desires to visit the area notwithstanding, I have never been granted a visa to travel to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Oman. My twenty-five years' experience and travel in the Near East as an archaeologist and teacher have been primarily in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and the Sinai. This limits my personal knowledge of Book of Mormon-related geography in the Near East to the territory between Jerusalem and the valley of Lemuel. But it is territory with which I am intimately acquainted, and an area in which I proceed (on foot, by jeep,

or in print) with confidence. It is in this very area, from Jerusalem to the valley of Lemuel, that Potter and Wellington go astray.

### The Route from Jerusalem to the Red Sea

Nephi gives us a short, matter-of-fact statement about the first leg of his family's journey upon leaving Jerusalem: they "departed into the wilderness" and then "came down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea" (1 Nephi 2:4–5). No further details are given—no names of camps, no description of terrain, no account of difficulties. Unlike the family's journey after leaving the valley of Lemuel, where we are told of the "director" (or Liahona) that aided them, where we are told the names of places they camped, and where we are told of adventures and hardships they experienced, the trip to the Red Sea is treated as a mundane matter of fact. This is probably because it *was* for them a mundane matter of fact.

Lehi and his sons had probably traveled to the Red Sea's Gulf of Eilat (or Gulf of Aqaba) many times in the years prior to their final departure from Jerusalem. They seem to have known the trail well. It was a regularly traveled route that exited the city to the southeast, into the wilderness of Judah east of Bethlehem and Tekoa, and descended via the Arugot valley to Ein Gedi. From Ein Gedi, the path turned south along the western shore of the Dead Sea and continued straight south through the desert wilderness of the Arabah valley to the Gulf of Eilat. The copper-mining area of Timna was located half a day's journey north of the gulf shore, and other copper-mining sites were located in nearby northern Sinai. It was probably to this area that Lehi and sons had come to mine copper ore and smelt it on-site into ingots for their metal-smithing activities back in Jerusalem (their smithing abilities are frequently noted throughout Nephi's writings).<sup>1</sup>

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1. For a detailed description of the possible metal mining, smelting, and smithing activities of Lehi and his sons and the connection to the Red Sea area, see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 113–17.

The distance from Jerusalem to the Gulf of Eilat via the Ein Gedi/Arabah valley route is just under two hundred miles and takes ten days to cover on foot, averaging twenty miles per day.<sup>2</sup> It is not known if Lehi and his family used camels for their desert travel. (They are never mentioned by Nephi, although Potter and Wellington assume throughout their book that camels must have been used.) If camels were employed, it would probably have shortened the travel time (via the Ein Gedi/Arabah valley) by one to two days. South of the Dead Sea, the route passed from Judean territory into Edomite territory, but there is no report of enmity between Edom and Judah from the death of Josiah until well into Zedekiah's reign. There would have been no danger to Lehi's travel parties from hostile neighbors along the Arabah valley. In every respect, the direct route south from Jerusalem to the Red Sea via Ein Gedi and the Arabah valley is the most plausible path for Lehi and his family to have followed. But it is not the path that Potter and Wellington prefer.

A word about alternative proposals is in order before examining their model. Lynn Hilton, who traveled in Arabia in 1975, suggested three different routes from Jerusalem to the Red Sea for Lehi's trail, mainly derived from modern highways in Israel and Jordan. These were first published in the *Ensign* in 1976 and subsequently in book form.<sup>3</sup> None was exactly the same as the ancient Ein Gedi/Arabah valley route described above, but one was similar—a Jericho/Qumran/Arabah valley route. (Hilton was unaware that travel south from Jericho and Qumran to Ein Gedi along the Dead Sea's western shore was not possible anciently—the modern road along the desert cliffs between Qumran and Ein Gedi was first cut and paved by Israelis only after 1967.)

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2. See D. Kelly Ogden and Jeffrey R. Chadwick, *The Holy Land—A Geographical, Historical, and Archaeological Guide to the Land of the Bible* (Jerusalem: BYU Jerusalem Center/HaMakor, 1990), 39. During the 1980s and 1990s the Jerusalem/Ein Gedi/Arabah valley route to the Gulf of Eilat was explored in its entirety on foot in separate projects by Ogden and Chadwick, who served as Near Eastern studies professors at BYU's Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.

3. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976). See also Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, "In Search of Lehi's Trail," *Ensign*, September 1976, 32–54, and October 1976, 34–63; Lynn M. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996).

Hilton's second route was to proceed southwest from Jerusalem via Hebron to Beersheba, then turn east to connect to the Arabah valley south of the Dead Sea. This was an unlikely and out-of-the-way route but was more practical than the third he proposed, which was to travel east from Jerusalem across the Jordan River to the area of modern Amman, Jordan (the ancient capital of Ammon), and then turn south to travel along the ancient King's Highway past Kerak and Petra to Aqaba. The difficulties with the King's Highway route are well known. Its path ran through territories controlled by Ammon and Moab, kingdoms that were enemies to Judah at the time of Lehi's trek. It is also much longer than the preferable Ein Gedi/Arabah valley route.

Traveling the practical and most likely route from Jerusalem straight south to the Red Sea via the Ein Gedi/Arabah valley route could be likened to a modern driving trip from Salt Lake City south to Phoenix. There is a direct and practical path for both journeys. By contrast, traveling from Jerusalem to the Red Sea via the King's Highway would be like driving from Salt Lake City to Phoenix via Denver—the eastward loop is a much longer and quite unnecessary addition to the route.

But now let us consider the route proposed in *Lehi in the Wilderness*. Potter and Wellington suggest that “Lehi would have wished to travel quickly, so he would no doubt have chosen an existing route” (p. 21). True, but they also maintain that “because the Jews were actively seeking Lehi's life” (p. 19) he would have needed “to escape Zedekiah's sphere of influence as quickly as possible” (p. 21). They therefore rule out any travel through Judah and dismiss the Arabah valley route without even discussing its merits. In addition, they give no hint that they even explored the route. Instead, they posit that Lehi traveled eastward from Jerusalem across the Jordan River, as in Hilton's third option, but rather than having Lehi travel south along the King's Highway (which they believe was too heavily settled and farmed to be described as “wilderness”), they opt for a route that lies even further to the east. This route, which passes from Amman to Ma'an through Jordan's east desert fringe, is identified in the book as the “Way of the Wilderness” spoken of in 2 Samuel 15:23. Potter and Wellington drove along this route,

suggesting that Lehi must have come this way, turning southwest at Ma'an to descend through the mountains to Aqaba (see p. 22).

The problems with this scenario are significant. First of all, if traveling from Jerusalem to the Red Sea via the King's Highway would be like driving from Salt Lake City to Phoenix by way of Denver, then a trip from Jerusalem to Aqaba on the route suggested by Potter and Wellington would be like going from Salt Lake City to Phoenix via Kansas! In terms of time, expense, effort, danger, or any issues of practical geography, it makes no sense at all. The route is well over a hundred miles longer (a significant issue on foot or on camel), and, like the King's Highway, it passed through territories of two known enemies of Judah (Ammon and Moab). It was also surely *terra incognita* to Lehi.

Second, the "Way of the Wilderness" name that Potter and Wellington take from 2 Samuel 15:23 is misapplied. King David is said to have "passed over the brook Kidron . . . toward the way of the wilderness." The "brook Kidron" is the valley east of Jerusalem's Old City, and the "way of the wilderness" refers to the desert path one encounters just over the Mount of Olives (cf. 2 Samuel 15:30). Perhaps they thought that when David was passing over the "brook Kidron" to the "way of the wilderness" he was passing over the Jordan River. But David's fording of the Jordan did not occur until two chapters later (cf. 2 Samuel 17:22), and there is no mention of "the way of the wilderness" in an east-of-Jordan context. Potter and Wellington have simply misread the passage and misused the biblical "way of the wilderness" phrase. It has no reference to a path in eastern Jordan.

A third problematic issue is the idea that Lehi would have wanted to avoid Judean territory. Potter and Wellington's claim that crossing the Jordan and taking an eastern Jordanian wilderness road somehow avoided travel through land that was in "Zedekiah's sphere of influence" (p. 21), while a route south through the Arabah valley did not, is incorrect. Judean territory in the period we are discussing extended east from Jerusalem all the way to the Jordan River, and possibly as far

east as the foothills of Mount Nebo.<sup>4</sup> Whether Lehi journeyed from Jerusalem southeast down to Ein Gedi or from Jerusalem slightly north-east down to the Jordan River, in either case he was within the borders of Judah. To cross the Jordan River to Ammon, Lehi would have had to pass through as much of “Zedekiah’s sphere of influence” as he would going from Jerusalem to the Arabah valley via Ein Gedi.

Curiously, Potter and Wellington bring up the fact that John the Baptist was “preaching in the wilderness of Judea” (Matthew 3:1). They then locate that event at Wadi el-Kharrar, a site just east of the Jordan River, which they visited. Lehi must have crossed the Jordan at this point, they claim (p. 21). But in doing so, they get caught in a geographical contradiction: In saying el-Kharrar is in the wilderness of Judea, and in saying Lehi traveled by way of el-Kharrar, they are saying that Lehi indeed traveled in the wilderness *in Judah* (Judea). But travel in Judah is exactly what they say Lehi would not have wanted to do. Avoiding travel in Judah was the reason they gave for maintaining that Lehi would not have journeyed south to the Red Sea via the Arabah valley (pp. 19–20). The authors cannot have it both ways on this issue.

In fact, Potter and Wellington (like others before them) probably overstate the actual danger to Lehi in Judah. While it is true that some in Jerusalem had sought to take Lehi’s life (1 Nephi 1:20; 2:1), these may have been spontaneous attempts of individuals angry with his prophecies, not necessarily a conspiracy in which Zedekiah or the government was involved. Once outside the big city, on the wilderness paths to either Jericho or Ein Gedi, Lehi was probably as secure as anyone else traveling the byways of Judah.

In any case, that there was probably no plot against the family of Lehi seems obvious from the fact that when his sons returned to Jerusalem to get the plates of brass, they had no trouble obtaining an initial audience with Laban (see 1 Nephi 3:4–12). Nor was any danger reported in returning to Jerusalem to convince Ishmael’s family to join Lehi’s party (see 1 Nephi 7:2–5). Judah was probably not the

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4. See *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed., ed. Yohanan Aharoni, Michael Avi-Yonah, Anson R. Rainey, and Ze’ev Safrai (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 122, map 158.

wholesale hotbed of hostility to Lehi and his family that many commentaries have assumed.

By contrast, Ammon and Moab, two kingdoms through which the authors maintain Lehi traveled on their “Way of the Wilderness,” were quite hostile to Judah in this period (cf. 2 Kings 24:2), and Jews journeying through their territories would place themselves at considerable risk. It is highly unlikely that Lehi could have passed through those kingdoms with a fraction of the security he would have still enjoyed in his native Judean territory.

One final note on the trail to the Red Sea: When Nephi and his brothers twice traveled back up to Jerusalem, they seem to have done so along the same route that Lehi took on the way down. Like the initial journey to the Red Sea, these trips were matter-of-factly noted (see 1 Nephi 3:9; 4:38; 7:3, 5) without any of the descriptions we see in the post-valley of Lemuel travel narrative. The fact that Nephi and his brothers traveled without their father, the time and means (including food and fodder) those journeys must have cost, and the unanticipated difficulties that occurred on those trips all combine to suggest that the shortest and most practical route between Jerusalem and the Red Sea was the one Lehi’s family utilized. That route would be the Ein Gedi/Arabah valley route, not the much longer, less logical, and misnamed “Way of the Wilderness” suggested in *Lehi in the Wilderness*. In terms of Lehi’s trail to the Red Sea, Potter and Wellington are simply “digging in the wrong place.”

### **The Borders Near (and Nearer) the Red Sea**

Nephi’s description that Lehi “came down by the borders near the Red Sea” is immediately followed by the explanation that he “traveled . . . in the borders which are nearer the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 2:5). What Nephi could have meant by his use of the term *borders* has been extensively discussed. In what way were the “borders near the Red Sea” different from “the borders which are *nearer* the Red Sea”? My own sense of this is that by using whatever word wound up being translated as “borders” Nephi was trying to say *limits*—specifically, the *limits* of dry land as one comes closer to the sea. By “borders near the Red

Sea” Nephi would simply have been referring to a place near the Gulf of Eilat coast, but not right on the coast. The area between Eilat and the copper mining area at Timna would qualify as such a place. By describing “borders which are *nearer* the Red Sea,” Nephi would have been indicating that Lehi traveled very near the Red Sea beach—not right on the seashore (or he would have used the word *seashore*, as in 1 Nephi 17:6) but along a path perhaps a hundred meters or so inland from the beach. This desert path, very near the beach (but not right on the seashore), was still referred to as “wilderness” by Nephi, and Lehi traveled down this path for three days (1 Nephi 2:6) before coming to the valley he would call Lemuel. The valley was a wadi in the desert mountains fronting the Red Sea coast, just a few hundred meters from the seashore.

*Lehi in the Wilderness* takes a much different approach to Nephi’s “borders”; it is another case where I think the authors are “digging in the wrong place.” Their way of dealing with “borders” is to interpret the term as *mountains*. They noticed that two lines of mountains run north to south parallel to the Red Sea coast. “It was just like Nephi had written,” the authors explain. “There are two mountain ranges (borders), one near the Red Sea (Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea), and one nearer the Red Sea” (p. 5). In this model, their valley of Lemuel (Tayyib al-Ism) was discovered by Lehi not along the coast, but miles inland from the seashore, deep inside the westernmost of the two mountain ranges.

This borders-equals-mountains model is almost intriguing, until one realizes how Potter and Wellington arrived at it. Here we will let them state their own case, because no contextual rephrasing could do it justice:

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*. 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*. (p. 3)

What they mean when they say “the Semitic language” is not clarified. I have some experience in ancient Near Eastern languages, but I have never heard of “the Semitic language.” As for the observation that the Hebrew term “cognates [*sic*] with Arabic,” the reference for note 1—an endnote following chapter 1—reads as follows:

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. (p. 12)

There does not seem to be any genuine expertise in Hebrew involved here. Certainly Potter and Wellington are not trained Hebraists. And the anonymous reviewer misled them if he/she communicated to them that the Hebrew word for *border* could somehow be translated as “mountain” in addition to “non-mountainous areas as well.”

The Hebrew term that Potter and Wellington render as “*gebul*” (it is actually pronounced *gvul*) does *not* mean “mountain.” It *never did* mean “mountain.” That the Hebrew term *gvul* is cognate to the Arabic term *jebel* is true enough. But because two words of related languages may be consonantly cognate does not require that they mean the same thing. Arabic *jebel* means “mountain,” but Hebrew *gvul* does not—it means “border” or “limit.” *Gvul* appears hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible, in both singular and plural form, and in not a single one of those contexts does the word mean “mountain.” *Gvul* is also never translated in the KJV English Bible as “mountain.” *Gvul* does *not* mean “mountain.”

In Hebrew, the term for mountain is *har*, and the plural term for “mountains” is *harim*. These terms also appear hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Mormon, when Nephi wanted to indicate a mountain he did so by saying “mountain” (see 1 Nephi 11:1;

16:30; 17:7, and “mount” in 18:3). Presumably, Nephi used the Hebrew word *har* when he wanted to say “mountain,” and he used the plural word *gvulot* (the plural of *gvul*) when he wanted to say “borders.” The two terms are not interchangeable, nor are they liable to be confused by anyone who speaks Hebrew. *Gvulot* does *not* mean “mountains.” This fact will weigh in when assessing Potter and Wellington’s candidate for the valley of Lemuel.

A different usage of the word *borders* occurs in 1 Nephi 2:8. Speaking of both the river Laman and the valley of Lemuel, Nephi reported: “the valley was in the borders near the mouth thereof.” This plainly means that the entrance to the valley of Lemuel was located on land at a point near the mouth of the river (i.e., close to where the river emptied into the sea). This indicates that the valley access was located not deep inside a mountain range (as in this model) but very close to the seashore—not right at the seashore, but perhaps within a hundred meters or so. This description, too, will be important in assessing the authors’ candidate for the valley and the nature of the river that ran in that valley.

### The Valley of Lemuel and the River Laman

Tayyib al-Isim is the crown jewel of Potter and Wellington’s discoveries in *Lehi in the Wilderness*. They lead with the story of their discovery, and they follow up with a detailed description of the site, including all the evidence they discern that assures them they have found the actual camp of Lehi. “How can we be certain that the wadi Tayyib al-Isim is the Book of Mormon’s Valley of Lemuel?” they confidently ask. “The answer is easy,” we are told. “Nephi made detailed assertions about the valley and its river.” And, we are assured, “the wadi Tayyib al-Isim matches all these characteristics perfectly” (p. 31).

But it does not. In one very specific instance—the fact that its small stream has no mouth—the wadi flatly fails to match Nephi’s description. And in other respects, such as coastal inaccessibility, its distance from the gulf’s north shore, and the difficulty of locating its inland access, the wadi presents problems when considered in the context of Nephi’s report.

From a layout and graphics perspective, *Lehi in the Wilderness* is a pleasure to read. Most chapters are enhanced not only with color photographs, but with excellent maps. The exceptions are the two chapters on Tayyib al-Isim, where no maps are provided to help the reader understand the location and nature of the wadi, its river, and its relation to the ocean and shoreline. This is a rather glaring deficit, in view of the fact that the valley is the jewel of the book.

To fill this gap, I consulted Potter's 1999 article on Tayyib al-Isim in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*,<sup>5</sup> which relates much of the same information found in *Lehi in the Wilderness*. The article featured a general map of the Gulf of Eilat (or Gulf of Aqaba) along with a close-up diagram map of the wadi and its river course. These helpful maps, or something like them, should certainly have been included in the book. Such maps would aid the reader in terms of spatially understanding the writers' valley of Lemuel candidate. On the other hand, the maps provide clues that Potter and Wellington are again "digging in the wrong place."

The difficulties of identifying Tayyib al-Isim with the valley of Lemuel include its inaccessibility from the coast and its difficult-to-find inland access. Potter and Wellington attempt to mitigate these issues with their "borders = mountains" proposition, but this approach has already been demonstrated untenable. The fact that its inland access was 74 miles from Aqaba (via their Land Rover) suggests that it was not only difficult to find, but too far for Lehi's group to have traveled in just three days.

The perennial stream Potter and Wellington found on their first trip into Tayyib al-Isim was the feature that initially convinced them they had found the valley of Lemuel (pp. 9–10). When addressing his son Laman, Lehi exclaimed: "O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness" (1 Nephi 2:9). It is easy to see why some would think this statement is describing the river Laman as a continually flowing brook. (I admit that I used to think this myself.) And it is easy to understand why Potter

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5. George Potter, "A New Candidate in Arabia for the Valley of Lemuel," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 54–63, 79.

and Wellington would think they had found the river Laman when they determined that the Tayyib al-Isim stream flows perennially.

But a perennial stream is *not* required to fulfill Nephi's description or Lehi's exclamation. Lehi said "continually running," not "continually flowing." A Near Eastern wadi's streambed can run all the way to the sea whether water happens to be flowing in it or not. I have no doubt that water was flowing when Lehi made his statement (which may have been during the winter months). But whether or not water was flowing in that stream six months later does not make or break the issue in terms of identifying the site of the valley of Lemuel. The streambed itself would have been a continually running course to the ocean for the wadi's water, whether seasonal or perennial.

Winter rains begin in the Sinai and Gulf of Eilat region as early as November and continue until as late as April, so that in any given year some of the seasonal streams in the region's wadis could conceivably flow as long as five months. All of the events and travel in the story of Lehi's family at the valley of Lemuel, from their arrival in 1 Nephi 2 to their departure in 1 Nephi 16, can be easily accommodated in a four-month (nineteen-week) period.<sup>6</sup> If Lehi's party arrived at the valley in late November and departed in early April, their stay would easily fit a four-month time frame. While some commentaries have suggested that Lehi's family stayed an entire year or more at the valley (which *would* require a perennial stream for their water source), this is not demanded by Nephi's account. A winter stay of no more than nineteen weeks, utilizing a seasonal stream flow, is quite plausible.

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6. A four-month (nineteen-week) stay at the valley of Lemuel, from mid-November to mid-April, would include two weeks of initial camp setup; two weeks' travel back to Jerusalem to visit Laban; one week to go to the land of inheritance to obtain gold and silver to buy the plates, then return to Jerusalem; one week to be robbed by Laban, chased into the wilderness, and return to Jerusalem to finally take the plates; two weeks for the return trip to the valley of Lemuel; two weeks for Lehi to study the plates of brass; two weeks to return to Jerusalem a second time to visit Ishmael; one week to convince and prepare his family for departure; two weeks to return again to the valley of Lemuel; one week in which Lehi experienced his vision and related it to his family; one week in which Nephi experienced the same vision and taught his brothers; one week to prepare and perform marriages of Lehi's sons to Ishmael's daughters; and one week to break camp and depart the valley.

So the fact that the stream at Tayyib al-Ism flows perennially is certainly not proof that the wadi was the valley of Lemuel. But another aspect of that stream is certain evidence that the site could *not* have been the valley of Lemuel. The stream has no mouth into the Red Sea. Nephi reported that the river Laman “emptied into the Red Sea” and that the valley was “near the mouth” of the stream (1 Nephi 2:8). But the stream at Tayyib al-Ism terminates nearly half a mile inland from the beach, far up the canyon. This should seal the case against Tayyib al-Ism.

Potter and Wellington recognize that this is a problem. Their solution for dealing with this inconsistency is one of the more remarkable theories put forth in the entire book. They suggest that the mountainous land mass on the Gulf of Eilat’s east coast is two hundred to four hundred feet higher now than it was in Lehi’s time! An “LDS geologist” informed them that the lowest part of their wadi and the beach at its west end were actually submerged under hundreds of feet of water at the time of Lehi (pp. 38–39). The Red Sea supposedly ran inland through the wadi back then, to a point where it met the Tayyib al-Ism stream. Thus, they claim, their river actually did empty into the Red Sea anciently, when the Arabian coastal land mass was as much as four hundred feet lower than it is now (and the current beach far under water).

How is this possible? Plate tectonics. The “LDS geologist” informed them that the tectonic plate that forms the east side of the great Rift Valley (of which the Gulf of Eilat is part) has been thrusting up “one to five centimeters per year” (p. 39). Multiplying 5 centimeters by the 2,600 years since Lehi’s time results in a total of 13,000 centimeters (that is, 130 meters, or some 425 feet). Thus the current beach at their site was deep under water in Lehi’s time, and the mountain ridge that is now four hundred feet above sea level was right at sea level back then. The ocean waters, they say, ran east into the granite canyon back in 600 BC, and then turned north to meet the stream.

But this theory is problematic. It is well known that tectonic movement is not constant. There have been long periods of time when the plates of the Rift Valley did not move at all. Archaeological evidence suggests that the eastern plate of the Rift Valley has moved less than

one hundred feet since 1000 BC. And when the plate moves upward, it does not rise only in the Tayyib al-Ism area—it moves upward all along the eastern side of the Rift. But if current shorelines had been even two hundred feet lower in the Iron Age than they are now, many well-known ancient settlements along the Rift's eastern shorelines could not have existed. On the Red Sea, the ancient port settlement of Ezion Geber (whose excavated remains are found at Tell el-Kheleifeh, near the modern city of Aqaba) would have been an uninhabitable underwater site.<sup>7</sup> Further north, on the shore of the Dead Sea, the ancient site of Bab edh-Dhra would have been just beneath the lake's salty water, and the entire *lissan* or “tongue” of the Dead Sea would have been deeply submerged, making the suggested travel from Moab to Judah (see 2 Chronicles 20:2) across that partial land bridge impossible.<sup>8</sup> The settlement of Zereth-shahar would have been a submerged site.<sup>9</sup> In the Jordan River valley, sites such as Adam, Zaphon (Tell es-Sa'idiyeh), and Sha'ar ha-Golan would have been far underground. And even further north, at the Sea of Galilee, Iron Age lakeshore sites at Ein Gev, Tel Hadar, Bethsaida, and other locations would have been at the bottom of the lake, and the towns at those sites never built.<sup>10</sup> But archaeological research at these sites indicates that they were *not* submerged or subsurface and that the eastern plate of the Rift was not two to four hundred feet lower in 600 BC, as the book claims. This means that the narrow stream in Tayyib al-Ism did *not* have a mouth that met the Red Sea. In 600 BC, as today, that stream terminated beneath the sands of the high-walled granite canyon nearly half a mile inland from the ocean shore. It simply could not have been the river Laman as described by Nephi.

Let us assume, though, that Wadi Tayyib al-Ism *was* two to four hundred feet lower in 600 BC than it is today and that its stream *did* in

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7. The eighth- and seventh-century BC levels at Tell el-Kheleifeh are discussed by Amihai Mazar in *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 450–51.

8. See *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 98, map 129.

9. See *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 61, map 71.

10. See site maps on the front and back covers of volumes 1 and 2 in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Carta/Israel Exploration Society, 1993).

fact meet the Red Sea's waters inside the "granite canyon." Even if this *had* been the case, the valley itself would still have failed to meet Nephi's description. Nephi noted that the valley of Lemuel "was in the borders *near* the mouth thereof"—that is, *near* the mouth of the river Laman (1 Nephi 2:8). This means that the entrance to the valley of Lemuel was not right *at* the mouth of the river, nor was the mouth of the river *in* the valley itself. The mouth of the river, where it met the Red Sea, has to have been outside the valley, not exactly at the valley entrance or in the valley. The valley has to have been *near* the river's mouth, not right there at the mouth. There has to have been a short distance (perhaps a hundred meters or so) between the mouth of the river (where it met the sea) and the rising mountains in which the valley entrance was located. No realistic assessment of the features of Tayyib al-Isim and its stream can match Nephi's description. The site cannot have been the valley of Lemuel. Potter and Wellington's sincere and impressive efforts notwithstanding, "they're digging in the wrong place."

But there are a number of sites along the Gulf of Eilat's eastern shoreline that do meet the general description given by Nephi. My own guess is that one of the wadis near the shore at Bir Marsha would be the strongest candidate for the actual valley of Lemuel. Why Bir Marsha? Because it is the furthest point south that one can travel along the east shore of the Gulf of Eilat. About fifty miles south of Ezion Geber, along that shoreline, high mountain cliffs jut out into the sea, cutting off the coastal path just south of Bir Marsha.

It would take at least two days for Lehi's party to cover those fifty miles on camels. If they proceeded more slowly (looking for a campsite) or if any were traveling on foot, it would take the group three days to go from the Ezion Geber area to Bir Marsha. They would then have pitched their tents in a secluded canyon in the mountain face just a few hundred meters from the Bir Marsha shoreline. With a seasonal winter stream running in the wadi to provide them with water, Lehi then gave the small river and the high-walled valley the names of his two eldest sons.

Potter and Wellington actually visited Bir Marsha on one occasion. In his *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* article, Potter noted

that they could only drive forty-four miles south of Aqaba before meeting the cliffs at Bir Marsha that cut off further coastal travel.<sup>11</sup> They then turned eastward, driving their Land Rover another thirty miles through the interior mountain passes to the upper access of Tayyib al-Isim. Their total of seventy-four miles would be essentially impossible for Lehi's party to have traveled in just three days, especially along the unfamiliar and twisting inland wadis. That the authors passed by Bir Marsha on their journey is ironic. They really *did* visit a viable valley of Lemuel candidate—without realizing it.

### A Genuinely Rewarding Experience

Despite the foregoing refutations of Potter and Wellington's theories, I genuinely enjoyed reading this book. The more closely I examined it, the more I found myself pondering the miracle that is our Book of Mormon. And the more I disagreed with it, the more I grew to appreciate George Potter, Richard Wellington, and their wives, families, and friends who joined them in their research—even though I have not yet met them. The spirit of adventure and sacrifice embodied in their efforts is remarkable. I know something of the effort and expense, the time and sacrifice, and even the occasional personal danger involved in travel and research “on the ground” in the Near East. Potter and Wellington are to be congratulated on their work.

The contrasting models of scriptural events and locations posited by a first generation of explorers have peculiar ways of leading students of future generations to different but genuinely correct conclusions. Though my own observations differ from those presented in *Lehi in the Wilderness*, after reading the book I felt as I do when I have engaged in a fascinating and friendly debate with good friends and colleagues. I learned a great deal from reading the experiences and testimonies of Potter and Wellington and suspect that any intelligent reader would be similarly rewarded.

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11. Potter, “New Candidate in Arabia for the Valley of Lemuel,” 60.

