

An ancient tomb at Al-Bid, the former Midianite capital which was later occupied by the Lihyanites. This oasis may have been the location from which Lehi's sons made their journeys back to Jerusalem (1 Ne. 2:6).



THE LIHYANITES

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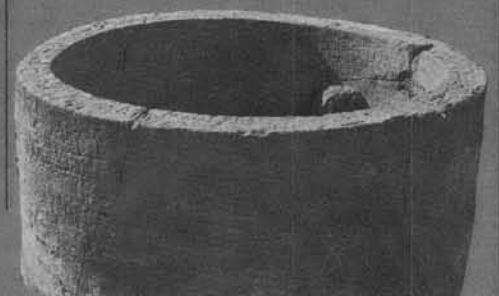
Editor's Note

This paper was presented at the thirty-second annual Symposium on Archeology of the Scriptures at Brigham Young University, 22 October 1983.

The wilderness traversed by Lehi's party consisted of both rugged rock formations and sandy deserts.



This ancient water tank stood in the center of the Lihyanite temple. Its dimensions are close to those of the "brazen sea" in Solomon's temple.



DID Lehi and his party influence the peoples and culture of the Arabian Peninsula as they made their way to the promised land? Did he leave his name among Arabian converts? While research has not yet provided conclusive answers to these questions, excavations during the past thirty years of a northern Arabian civilization named Lihyanite (pronounced *Lehi-an-ite*) raises interesting questions and provocative possibilities.

The Lihyanite culture mysteriously appeared in the sixth century B.C. in that part of the Arabian Peninsula known as the northern Hejaz. This part of Arabia has been and continues to be the home of many varied cultures and peoples.

One of the best known of these civilizations is the biblical community of Midian, a group predating the Lihyanites by several hundred years. Genesis 25:1-4 explains that Midian was one of the six sons of Abraham by his second wife Keturah. Over a period of centuries, the descendants of Midian became very numerous. They and their hundreds of thousands of sheep (Num. 31:37) occupied the northern Hejaz with their capital at Al-Bid situated in the large Wadi Al-Afel. It was from this civilization in the fifteenth century B.C. that Jethro emerged as Moses' father-in-law (Ex. 3:1), a holder of the true line of priesthood (D&C 84:6-7). Thus the Midianite culture flourished contemporaneously with the Israelite community in Egypt, and was one to which Moses fled after killing an Egyptian (Ex. 2:11-15).

Eventually the Midianites were conquered by the people of Dedan, a society known to the Israelites and mentioned in the Bible several times from Genesis to Ezekiel. Listed in scripture as grandsons of Abraham, Dedan and Sheba were brothers, each of whom founded a powerful civilization. While their genealogies in Genesis 10 and Genesis 25 differ, it appears the pair were descendants of Abraham by his second wife Keturah and were likely several generations removed from Father Abraham. Both brothers settled in the Arabian Peninsula. The kingdom of Sheba was at first the more powerful and ruled from the peninsula's corner in the southwest to the city of Dedan in the north. Finally the Dedanite kings became independent of Sheban control and by Solomon's time had established themselves as a power on the southern flank of Israel. The Dedanites were considered the trade route protectors or caravaners of the frankincense trail and were known for their "shaven heads" (Jer. 25:23).

Their rule extending southward from Edom, Dedan

Archeological remains indicate the presence of the Israelite religion in the Lihyanite culture. Could Lehi have left such teachings with converts in Arabia?

became a rich and powerful nation by extracting taxes from each northbound camel caravan laden with frankincense. Numerous rock writings and extensive ruins, many unexcavated, tell of their greatness and dominion.

By the sixth century B.C. Dedan's power was waning. Then, from almost nowhere, a tribe known as Lihyan began to take control of the area. According to Dr. Alois Musil, noted Saudi Arabian archeologist, the Lihyan

people were a native clan ruling first from Dedan and later spreading fifteen miles south to an oasis called Al-Ula.¹ Reported to be the most beautiful oasis in northern Arabia,² this location became the Lihyanite capital. The archeological remains of this group are centered in but not confined to the cities of Dedan and Al-Ula.

Little is known of the origins of this people. Biblical accounts make no mention of a man named Lehjan or Laeanites, but at least one writer from the second century, Agatharchides from Persia, was familiar with this widespread civilization and referred to the Gulf of Aqaba as the "Laeanic Gulf."³ Pliny the Elder, of the first century A.D., wrote, "Al-Hijr is the royal seat of the Laeanites."⁴ Both Agatharchides of Persia and Pliny were foreigners and wrote the name of this people as it sounded to them in their languages. But the name *Lihyan* is from the civilization's own inscriptions. The Saudi Arabian government archeological department describes the Lihyanites as a tribal group who probably followed the common practice of taking their name from some respected leader. Yet their point of origin remains unknown.

Several archeologists date the Lihyanite civilization to the fourth or third centuries B.C.⁵ In contrast, a recent issue of *Smithsonian* magazine pushes the date of this culture back as far as 600 B.C., referring to it as the Dedantic-Lihyanite civilization.⁶ Their culture seems to have persisted until the first or second centuries B.C., at which time they were conquered by the Nabatean civilization under the leadership of Mas'udu, who wrote of the conquest in Nabatean script.

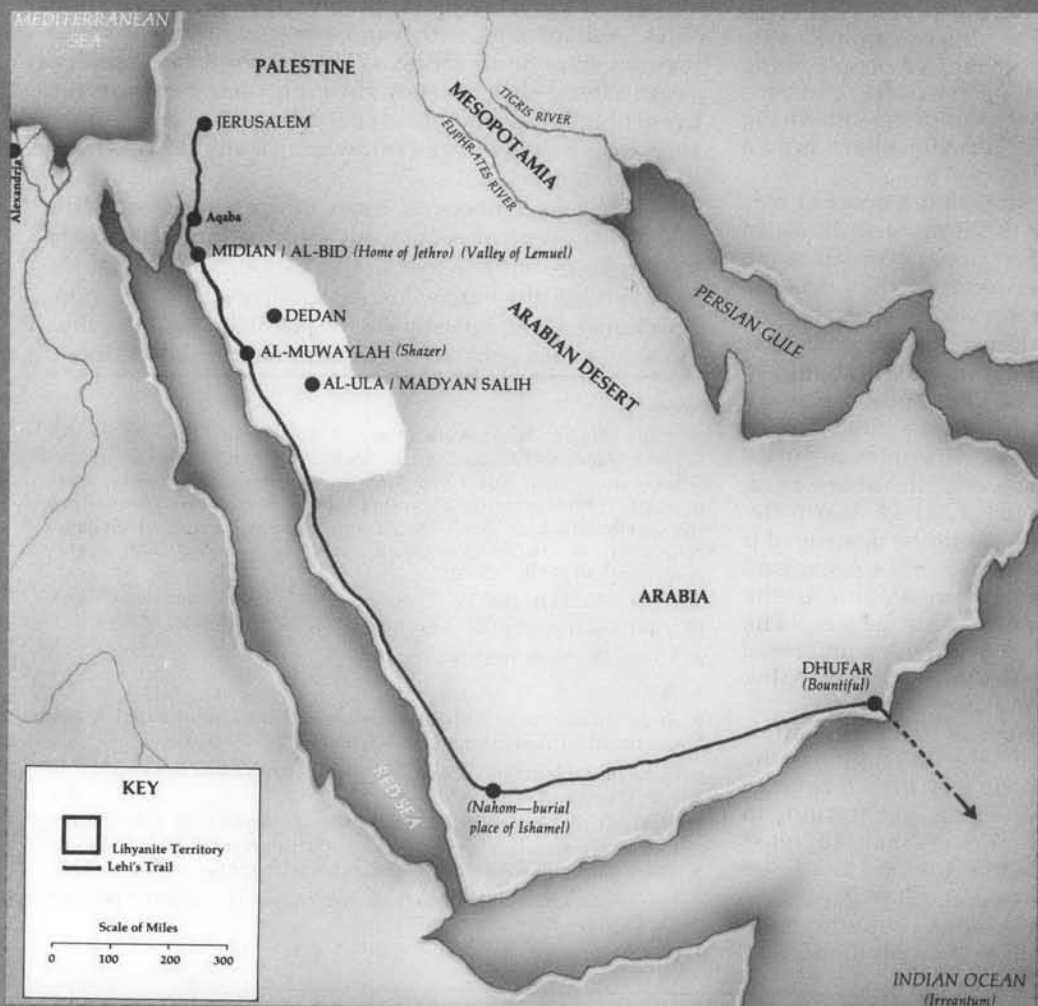
The most striking connection to the Book of Mormon narrative is the name *Lihyan*, a name so similar to *Lehi*, one would think the Mormons had made it up themselves.

The legacy of the Lihyanite culture consists of ruined buildings, rock tombs, heroic sandstone statues, and inscribed rock stelae covering an area extending as far north as Aqaba and as far south as Yanbu. While the Lihyanite people have been called "pastoral shepherds and guards for the camel caravans along the trade routes,"⁷ the magnificent statues, stone stelae, and carved burial caves suggest they were industrious builders of cities as well. The writing found in surviving Lihyanite inscriptions is reported to be related graphically to the Sinaitic form, i.e., from tribes in Sinai. It is considered by one of the philologists of the area to be a bridge between Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Phoenician alphabet.

If the *Smithsonian* dating of the Lihyanite culture is correct, the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi and his party would have been entering the area of the northern Hejaz during the decline of the Dedanites and the rise of the Lihyanites. In our book *In Search of Lehi's Trail*, we theorized that Lehi and his family stayed three or more of their eight wilderness-years at the large oasis of Al-Bid, identified by scholars as the former Midianite capital.⁸ From this location, Lehi's sons made two journeys back to Jerusalem. It was also at this place that the group likely planted crops and witnessed the marriages of four sons and Zoram to Ishmael's five



Statues such as this one at Al-Ula are among the many archeological remains of the Lihyanite civilization. This figure is about one meter high.



daughters. Here, too, Lehi read the brass plates and taught their contents, the religious history of the Israelites, to his family (something not done in a few days).

After leaving this area, Lehi's party "traveled for the space of four days, [in] nearly a south-southeast direction" perhaps to the large well-watered oasis of Al-Muwaylah on the caravan trail. This ancient route heads south-southeast along the borders near and nearer the Red Sea. The distance from Al-Bid to Al-Muwaylah is approximately seventy-six miles, a stretch which could be traversed comfortably in four days by camel. Thus, we believe Al-Muwaylah to be the most likely location of "Shazer," the place Lehi's party stopped after this four-day journey. (1 Ne. 16:13.)

If the Smithsonian dating is correct, Lehi and his party would have been entering the northern Hejaz during the decline of the Dedanites and the rise of the Lihyanites.

Because of the many ruins now surveyed (but as yet uncovered) by archeologists in the northern Hejaz, it is apparent this area was heavily populated in the sixth century B.C. If Lehi were traveling through this area at this time, he would likely have encountered at least some of the peoples living there. Furthermore, since Lehi was a prophet, it is not implausible to suppose that he was preaching and warning various groups of people along his way just as he had done in Jerusalem. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the neighboring town of Makna (today Al-Hql) is known to have been a Jewish colony in 600 B.C.

The Book of Mormon's assertion that a prophet was traveling through this area at this time also finds an interesting correspondence in traditions recorded in the Koran and preserved in the later name of the Dedanite capital. Following the takeover by the Arab-Nabeteian culture, the name Dedan fell into disuse and was replaced by the name *Madyan Salih*, a name still applied to the neighboring city of Al-Ula. The translation of *Madyan Salih* is literally "cities of the Prophet Salih." Salih is one of three pre-Islamic prophets mentioned in Sura 7 of the Koran. According to this work, all three—Hud, Shueib, and Salih—were sent by God to warn the inhabitants of the land that they would be destroyed if they did not choose the right path, repent of paganism, and return to monotheism. Interestingly, this is the same message Lehi was commanded to declare. The civilizations among which these prophets ministered were each destroyed, fulfilling the unheeded warning and serving as examples to future generations.

Another interesting correspondence to the Lehi story lies in archeological indications of Israelite religion in the Lihyanite culture. Could Lehi have left such teachings with converts in Arabia? Commenting on the ruins in this area, Dr. Frederick W. Winnett notes that the "most striking antiquity of ancient Dedan [Lihyan] is a large stone cylinder 12 feet in diameter and 7 feet deep with walls 11 inches thick. According to legend it is where the ancient pre-Islamic prophet Salih milked his camel. . . .

Three stone steps inside 'the pail' suggest it was a reservoir holding water." Winnett further states that this immense vessel is "free standing with no evidence of a conduit to carry water to it or into it, suggesting it was filled by hand. It stood in the center of an open court of the Lihyanite temple."⁹

Curiously, the measurements of this font are almost identical to the "brazen sea" of Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 7:23-25). Though there is no evidence at this time that the Lihyanite font rested on the backs of twelve oxen, the search continues. While the Saudian Arabian government is understandably reluctant to admit to an extended influence of the Jewish or Israelite religion in their area, to call this font only a large water tank seems to fall short of a satisfactory explanation.

Of course, the most striking connection to the Book of Mormon narrative is the name *Lihyanite* itself, a name so similar to *Lehi*, one would think the Mormons had made it up themselves. Too, the appearance of the Lihyanite culture at exactly the same time and place as Lehi and his party raises interesting possibilities. Did Lehi leave his memory and his name behind through converts he made before he left for America?

Combining this information with a little speculation produces an interesting hypothesis: Being a prophet of God, Lehi warned not only those in Jerusalem but the Dedanites to repent and be baptized or be destroyed. At least some of the many Israelites living in the northern Hejaz in the sixth century B.C. were converted by Lehi's words. Lehi's influence reached the mysterious group of pastoral people who later called themselves by his name, "Lihyanites." As their culture grew, they built cities and temples with sandstone statues and stelae, their civilization reaching its apogee some two hundred years after Lehi's journey through their communities. Eventually, they too apostatized from the truths their ancestors had embraced and were finally destroyed by the first century B.C.

As archeology uncovers more information about this interesting group of people, our information will become more reliable and the speculation can end. In the meantime, Lehi's eight-year wilderness journey takes on more significance as we contemplate the possibility that his influence could have generated a civilization in Saudi Arabia.

Notes

1. Alois Musil, *The Northern Hegaz: A Topographical Itinerary*, ed. J.K. Wright, American Geographical Society Oriental Explorations and Studies no. 1 (New York: The American Geographical Society, 1926), p. 299. For further information about the Dedanite/Lihyanite culture, see Garth Bawden, "Kheif El-Zahrah and the Nature of Dedanite Hegemony in the Al-Ula Oasis," *Atlat: The Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology* 3 (1979): 63-72.
2. F. V. Winnett and W. L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 42.
3. Musil, *The Northern Hegaz*, p. 299.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *An Introduction to Saudi Arabian Antiquities* (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Department of Antiquities and Museums, 1975), p. 63.
6. Dora Jane Hamblin, "Treasures of the Sands," *Smithsonian Magazine* 14 (September 1983): 43.
7. Alois Musil, *Northern Negd: A Topographical Itinerary*, ed. J. K. Wright, American Geographical Society Oriental Explorations and Studies no. 5 (New York: The American Geographical Society, 1928), p. 313.
8. Lynn M. and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Co., 1977), p. 28.
9. Winnett, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, p. 39.