



LESSONS LEARNED FROM *Lehi's Cave*

By William A. Johnson

For a number of years, rumors have circulated in Mormon congregations about a spectacular archaeological find known as "Lehi's Cave." I first heard this story in 1972 from a highly respected sister in Chevy Chase Ward, Maryland. She reported the discovery of a cave in Israel containing an inscription with the name *Nephi*, a find which had reinforced her testimony in the Book of Mormon. Another member of the ward corroborated this sister's statement but added that the cave also contained quotations from 1 Nephi, designs for ships, and a map indicating the route that would be taken by Lehi and his family to the sea. This brother also declared that an Israeli archaeologist named Dr. Joseph Ginat had worked on the cave and had established beyond doubt that the cave was, in fact, a place of refuge for Lehi and his family prior to departing to the New World. Since then, I have heard other members echo these claims in sacrament meetings, Sunday School, and priesthood classes, or assert that it was the hiding place for Nephi and his brothers in their efforts to obtain the brass records from Laban.

After repeated exposure to these stories, I decided to investigate for myself, partly, I must

admit, because of the hope that many members of the Church share that the cave might contain scientific evidence of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon but also with the skepticism of a scholar and a nagging suspicion that the Lord simply did not operate this way.

In 1976, while on a lecture circuit in the Middle East, I took time out to meet with Joseph Ginat in Tel Aviv to discuss what exactly was found in the cave. Ginat was then an anthropologist teaching Arab studies at Haifa University and working for the Israeli government as an advisor on Arab affairs. Like many Israelis, he is an archaeologist only by avocation. Ginat had previously spent two years living in Salt Lake City, where among other things, he was a visiting instructor at the University of Utah working on his doctorate in anthropology. While in Salt Lake City, he brought Lehi's Cave to the attention of Church officials. He also published an article about the cave.

Lehi's Cave was uncovered in 1961 by a bulldozer building a military road near what was then the border between Jordan and Israel. The cave was found on the eastern slope of a hill named Khirbet Beit Lei about 22 miles south-southwest of Jerusalem. Inside the cave were eight skeletons. On the walls of the antechamber

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to the cave were several incomplete and crudely written inscriptions in ancient Hebrew as well as roughly drawn pictographs of three human figures, two vessels, and several geometric shapes. Observers have described these carvings with such words as "graffiti," "scratchings," and "doodling."

The first scholar to study the cave was Joseph Naveh, an archaeologist with Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It was Naveh who directed the excavation of the cave for the Israeli government's Department of Antiquities. Naveh speculated that the find was a burial cave for a family of Levite singers, although he also suggested that someone may have used the cave as a temporary place of refuge. He proposed dating the carving on the cave wall to the reign of Hezekiah who became King of Judah in 715 B.C., more than a century before Lehi and his family might have dwelt in the area. Naveh also attempted to translate the inscriptions on the walls of the antechamber. He interpreted the three major inscriptions, which he classified by letters A through C, as follows:

- A. "Yahveh (is) the God of the whole earth; the mountains of Judah belong to him, to the God of Jerusalem."
- B. "The (Mount of) Moriah Thou hast favored, the dwelling of Yah, Yahveh."
- C. "(Yah)veh deliver (us)!"

Naveh was careful to point out that, because the inscriptions were crude and incomplete, he had reservations about the correctness of his translation. He did not attempt to interpret the various pictographs on the walls of the antechamber other than identifying the three human figures as a man holding a lyre, a man raising the palms of his hands as though in prayer, and a figure with headgear. He named the find "Jerusalem Cave."

In 1970, Dr. Frank Moore Cross, Jr., a professor of Hebrew at Harvard University, published a chapter of a book disputing Naveh's findings. Cross thought that the inscriptions dated from around 600 B.C. He based this belief on several characteristics of the script used in the cave that are found in Hebrew writing no earlier than the sixth century B.C. Cross also disagreed with Naveh's suggestion that the cave was used only for burials. Instead, he suggested that it had also been used as a place of refuge or protection for a person or persons fleeing the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Cross based this supposition on a substantially different translation of two of the three major inscriptions on the wall. According to Cross, the three inscriptions should read:

- A. "I am Yahweh thy God; I will accept the cities of Judah and will redeem Jerusalem."
- B. "Absolve (us) O merciful God! Absolve (us) O Yahweh!"
- C. "Deliver (us) O Lord."

Cross suggested that inscription A may have



been the citation of lost prophecy.

Ginat stated that the Cross article has now become the accepted interpretation of Lehi's Cave. According to Ginat, it is also generally agreed that the cave was a place of refuge for a prophet fleeing Jerusalem at the time of its destruction. Cross, however, was more restrained. Although he suggested that the inscriptions were written by a "refugee fleeing the Chaldeans who conquered Judah and destroyed the holy city in 587 B.C.," he concludes his article by saying, "Perhaps such speculations are built on too flimsy a foundation of facts; at all events, we shall suppress the temptation to suggest that the oracle and the petitions may have been the work of a prophet or his amanuensis fleeing Jerusalem" (*Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, p. 304).

Lehi's Cave has been studied by several Mormon scholars, the most notable among them being Professor LaMar Berrett of Brigham Young University. After many years of examining the evidence, as well as several trips to the cave, Professor Berrett reported in an unpublished article that there is no conclusive evidence that the cave was a place of refuge for Lehi or members of his family. What evidence has been unearthed, Berrett believes, is largely circumstantial or irrelevant. Berrett questions the dating of some of the cave's graffiti by both Naveh and Cross, suggesting the possibility that it could have been carved on the wall at a later time. In any event, Berrett concludes, "the dating problem is still not solved" ("The So-called Lehi Cave," p. 4).

Berrett also argues that the inscriptions, seemingly the strongest archaeological evidence supporting the Lehi's Cave legend, are "incomplete and blurred" and, because of this, their correct translation is still not final. He notes that such inscriptions are not unique to this particular cave at Khirbet Beit Lei. Rather, pleas for salvation, redemption, and delivery from one's enemies are relatively common. Carvings of human figures similar to those found in Lehi's Cave have also been found in other caves near Khirbet Beit Lei.

Besides the three figures, the antechamber





wall also contained pictographs of two sailing vessels. As Naveh noted, this is something of an anomaly since the cave is quite distant from the sea and its inhabitants probably did not have too much connection with seafaring and fishing. Some Mormons have cited this as evidence that the cave was, in fact, a dwelling place for Lehi and his family prior to their departure for the sea. Berrett notes, however, that representations of ships are found in other burial caves in the region and that "crudely drawn ships have been funerary symbols throughout the centuries." Also, Lehi and his family spent eight years in the wilderness near the Red Sea before Nephi was instructed by the Lord to "construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee" (1 Ne. 17:8). In other words, the scriptures cast doubt upon the suggestion that the carvings were designs for the ships to be built for the journey to the New World.

It is also important to note that, contrary to rumor, the name *Nephi* was not inscribed on the wall of the cave or its antechamber. Nor were any passages from the Book of Mormon. Why, then, has this cave come to be known as Lehi's Cave?

One reason is that the location of the cave in Hebrew, *Khirbet Beit Lei*, according to Ginat, translates into English as the "ruin of the House of Lei." Ginat notes that, while, the word "Lei" means "cheek" in both Arabic and Hebrew, it is also a variant of the proper name *Lehi*.

Berrett, while not disputing Ginat's translation, points out that the word *lehi* also means "jawbone" in Hebrew. There is a reference to a place named Lehi in the Old Testament (Judg. 15:9-17). This place was situated near the border between Judah and the land of the Philistines in the general vicinity of the cave. It was here that Samson was betrayed by the Judeans to the Philistines. It was here, also, that Samson killed a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. As a result, according to the Bible, the spot where this feat was performed was called "Ramath-lehi," meaning "heights of lehi," "lifting up of the jawbone," or "casting away of the jawbone." There is, in other words, a solely biblical reason for



finding the name *Lehi* in this region that bears no relationship to the prophet Lehi and his family.

One question that immediately comes to mind is how a place called Lehi around 1100 B.C. could be named for a prophet called Lehi who lived around 600 B.C. According to Ginat, by ancient Hebrew tradition, great people, especially great prophets, often took their names from their places of origin. Therefore, the fact that Lehi might bear the name of his place of origin is not unusual. But if this is so, why was the prophet Lehi not named Jerusalem since, according to the Book of Mormon, that is where he came from? Even if the suppositions surrounding Lehi's Cave are correct, Khirbet Beit Lei was, at most, only a temporary place of refuge.

Of course it is possible that this place of refuge was at or near Lehi's ancestral home. However, this explanation overlooks the fact that Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh whose ancestral tribal area was north of Judah and Jerusalem in Samaria and adjoining the territory east of the Jordan River. Khirbet Lei, on the other hand, is in Judah south-southwest of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Berrett notes that some members of the other tribes of Israel, including Manasseh, resettled in Judah. In particular, it is reported in 2 Chronicles that "strangers out of Ephraim and Manasseh" were brought to Jerusalem under the reign of Asa, a king of Judah who ruled around 900 B.C. (2 Chr. 15:8-20). One can only speculate whether the three hundred years between the reign of Asa and the life of Lehi were sufficient for Lehi to claim Khirbet Beit Lei as his ancestral home. One also wonders what intervening events would lead Lehi or his ancestors to move from Jerusalem to Khirbet Beit Lei and then back to Jerusalem if, in fact, they were among the descendants of Manasseh brought to Jerusalem by Asa.

Another piece of evidence cited by Ginat in support of Mormon speculation is that the cave lies in Lehi's southward path of travel as indicated in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, Ginat reports that Lehi's Cave is on what was then the main road from Jerusalem to what is now the port of Aqaba. Berrett points out, however, that a more direct and less dangerous route to the Red Sea would be south or southeast of Jerusalem. Berrett also cites a revelation given in the Kirtland Temple in which Frederick G. Williams learned that Lehi traveled south-southeast from Jerusalem.

Ginat cites two other place-names that lend support to LDS beliefs. Two miles from the cave are ancient ruins that bear the name *Alam*. This, according to Ginat, is the masculine version of the Hebrew feminine name, *Alma*. Right word; wrong gender. Nearby is a small wadi or dry river bed named Abu-Laban which, according to Ginat, translates into English as "Father of Laban." Berrett notes, however, that the word *laban* means *white* and possibly refers to the white, chalky soil of the wadi. This last explanation,

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Berrett implies, is more plausible than to suggest a connection to the Laban of the Book of Mormon.

Ginat has also talked to a Bedouin who directed him to a nearby oak tree on a hill surrounded by a wall. This place was called Khirbet Beit Lei, according to the Bedouin, because an ancient prophet named Lei lived there. Subsequently, LaMar Berrett recorded the same Bedouin's account and found his story to be only partially consistent with that given by Joseph Ginat. He also found an old man in another village who told essentially the same story as the Bedouin.

Nevertheless, Berrett, skeptical about the special significance attached to the cave, concludes:

Wouldn't it have been more logical for Nephi to have used one of the hundreds of natural caves for shelter, rather than a burial cave full of skeletons? Why were the bones of the eight people in the 'Jerusalem Cave' found undisturbed, if people hid in the cave for any length of time? . . . Would they become 'tainted,' as they sat among the dead men's bones? These, and many other questions, make any connection between this burial cave and the Book of Mormon highly unlikely. (So-called Lehi's Cave," p. 7.)

Whether or not Lehi stayed in a cave in Khirbet Beit Lei is arguable. What is not arguable, however, is that many of the claims made about Lehi's Cave have been exaggerated far beyond the truth. Moreover, despite substantial investigation by several scholars, false claims about the cave continue and are being embellished over time. Lehi's Cave is a good example of how folklore can develop and come to be accepted as truth by well-meaning members of the Church.

For example, just after returning from Israel in 1976, I taught a lesson in a priesthood class about the facts and myths surrounding Lehi's Cave. After the lesson, I was stopped by the father of one of the members of the ward who was visiting his son. The man was ashen-faced. "Is everything you have said true?" he asked. "To the best of my knowledge, it is," I responded. This brother went on to explain that as first counselor in an Idaho stake's presidency he had given a number of talks about Lehi's Cave, relating, among other things, the story that Nephi's name was found on the cave's wall. Like several others, he identified Cleon Skousen as the source of this particular claim. This man had also been telling his listeners that Joseph Ginat had embraced Mormon doctrine and, were it not for the fact that he was the "number two man" in the Israeli government and would suffer politically, would be baptized into the Church. I informed him that the number two man in the Israeli government at that time was Yigael Allon, Israel's deputy prime minister, and that Ginat was considerably further down the Israeli government's pecking order and much further away from conversion to the Church than he supposed.

Several years ago, a former bishop in my present ward bore his testimony in a Gospel Doctrine class about how, while in Israel, he had visited

the cave and had marveled at the inscriptions and pictographs on the cave wall. This, he said, had reconfirmed his belief that ours was the only true church. After class, I confronted him about what he had said, pointing out, among other things, that he could not have seen the carvings in the cave because, shortly after being discovered, they were removed to a museum in Jerusalem and much of the cave was destroyed. He corrected himself. He had, in fact, seen them at the museum, Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem, I noted, is a memorial to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust located on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The pictographs and inscriptions are, in fact, housed in the National Museum in Jerusalem which contains many of that nation's antiquities.

I am concerned at the tendency of many members as well as some nonmembers of the Church to substitute archaeological evidence for faith and personal revelation through the Holy Spirit, the only meaningful and enduring basis for one's testimony. If God wanted mankind to have scientific proof of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, why then are the golden plates not now housed in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. for everyone to see and translate?

There is also an unfortunate tendency among those who have talked about Lehi's Cave to embellish the truth. With some, I suspect, the reason may be a misguided zeal to prove to all doubters, once and for all, that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God. For a people long ridiculed for their peculiar beliefs, this would give sweet satisfaction. With others, the reason may be an unwholesome desire for signs. Like Thomas, they must doubt until they have tangible proof that what they have been told is true. And, with some, unfortunately, the reason may be more self-indulgent. Several who have perpetuated the legend of Lehi's Cave, I suspect, have profited from it by arranging trips to the cave site. Others have derived ego gratification from the legend by gaining both notoriety and access to high officials of the Church.

Many years ago, one friend in the Church, after grudgingly admitting to me that some of the claims about Lehi's Cave have been exaggerated, argued nevertheless that the story of Lehi's Cave is still an effective missionary tool. To the contrary, stretching the truth diminishes the credibility of the Church and its members. Misrepresentation and distortion of the truth could, over the long run, drive potential converts, as well as established members, from the Church. And, when it comes to matters of salvation and exaltation, it is the long run that counts.

WILLIAM A. JOHNSON holds a Ph.D. in economics from Harvard University and is president of the Jofree Corporation, a consulting firm specializing in the oil and gas industry. Thanks go to Professor LaMar Berrett of Brigham Young University and to C. Ross Anderson of Salt Lake City, without whose help this paper would not have been written.