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Lehi the Smelter: New Light on Lehi's Profession

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LEHI THE SMELTER: NEW LIGHT ON LEHI'S PROFESSION

Neal Rappleye

A strong case has been made by John A. Tvedtnes and Jeffrey R. Chadwick that Lehi was a metalworker by profession.¹ Although the text gives several indications of Nephi's (and by implications, Lehi's) familiarity with the craft of working metals, prominent Book of Mormon scholar John L. Sorenson nonetheless disagreed with this assessment on the grounds that, "it would be highly unlikely that a man who had inherited land and was considered very wealthy (1 Nephi 3:25) would have been a metalworker, for the men in that role tended to be of lower social status and were usually landless."² More recent findings, however, are changing the picture.

In the latest issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, editor Hershel Shanks has a short comment entitled "Life Was Not So Bad for Smelters," which draws on the very recent findings at both Timna and Faynan, both mining towns in antiquity, to conclude, "While life for miners at ancient copper mining sites was 'hell on earth,' the smelters of the better class feasted like visitors at a first-class spa!"³ According to Shanks, Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef, the archaeologists at Timna, "draw a

1 See John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, UT: Horizon, 2003), 78-97; 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), 113-117. Also see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:78-80.

2 John L. Sorenson, "The Composition of Lehi's Family," in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990*, 2 vols., ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:176.

3 Hershel Shanks, "Life Was Not So Bad for Smelters," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (January/February 2015): 6.

distinction between the low-class miners and the higher-class smelters.” The abstract of their study describes the nature of the evidence:

The popular image of metalworking sites in desert settings envisages armies of slaves engaged in back-breaking labour. *This is in conflict with ethnographic evidence indicating that skilled specialist metalworkers are often accorded high social status.* This study approaches that contradiction directly by studying the remains of domesticated food animals from domestic and industrial contexts at Timna in southern Israel. The authors demonstrate that the higher-value meat cuts come from industrial contexts, where they were associated with the specialist metalworkers, rather than the ‘domestic’ contexts occupied by lower status workers engaged in support roles. It is suggested that the pattern documented here could also have been a feature of early metalworking sites in other times and places.⁴

The authors go on to explain, “Metalworkers are commonly perceived to have been a cheap labour force, but a growing set of data shows the contrary, especially in the pyrotechnological stage of primary metal production.”⁵ They are looking specifically at the remains of animal bones, which indicate that smelters enjoyed the meat from the best body parts on local and imported species, while the miners and others got the butchers scraps. “This observation,” they note, “implies that different ranks may be attributed to the two populations, with the people engaged in smelting enjoying the higher status.”⁶ They conclude,

We suggest that the people engaged in smelting were actually highly skilled craftpersons and were treated as such. This fundamental observation stems from the inherent complexity of the technology that demanded and created an idiosyncratic class of workers, and hence we believe it should apply to smelting activities across time and space, namely at different periods, in different cultures and even in relation to different metals.⁷

4 Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef, “The Socioeconomic Status of Iron Age Metalworkers: Animal Economy in the ‘Slaves’ Hill’, Timna, Israel,” *Antiquity* 88/341 (2014): 775, emphasis mine.

5 Ibid., 776.

6 Ibid., 785.

7 Ibid., 787.

According to Shanks, archaeologists in the Faynan have attested similar findings that will soon be published. The findings at both sites date to the early first millennium BC.

Chadwick has specifically argued for a business association between Lehi and the mines of Timna, since they are near the Red Sea in the area Lehi most likely traveled too (see 1 Nephi 2:5).⁸ Daniel C. Peterson likewise feels that Lehi's smelting skills "might have dictated the direction they went. It would be a known route. If you do metalwork, then you probably know the mines of Timna at that period."⁹ It is therefore significant that evidence for the higher socioeconomic status of smelters comes from this same area.

While we may never know for certain what Lehi's profession was, metalworking is an increasingly appealing option. Not only does it fit with Nephi's apparent knowledge and interest in metallurgy but also lends explanatory power to the direction Lehi traveled. Now, it can also be said to be consistent with Lehi's apparent socioeconomic status.

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⁸ See Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 117.

⁹ Daniel Peterson, in *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land*, ed. S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006), 62.

