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Bountiful Found

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Abstract Review of *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi's Journey across Arabia to Bountiful* (1994), by Warren P. Aston and Michaela Knoth Aston.

Warren P. Aston and Michaela Knoth Aston. *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi's Journey across Arabia to Bountiful*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994. vi + 88 pp., color photo section, with index. \$15.95.

Bountiful Found

Reviewed by L. Ara Norwood

The world will prove Joseph Smith a true prophet by circumstantial evidence.

Joseph Smith

Not a great deal of literature impresses me these days. I read what some consider an inordinate amount of material every month, including an average of four books, plus about a half dozen magazines and journals, not to mention numerous letters, memorandums, and bulletins. Much of it is unoriginal, monotonous, and bland. So imagine my delight after picking up the Astons' publication! I found the work to be insightful, inspiring, and just plain interesting.

In The Footsteps Of Lehi begins with a prologue, which serves to give the readers a sense of the origin of the Astons' odyssey. We learn where and when they met, what their common goals and interests were in the early part of their marriage, and how those goals prompted much of their research. All of this serves to add a human element to the book and reminds us that we are dealing with normal everyday people like ourselves. Then follow three main sections of the book. Part One concerns the Astons' work in locating Nahom, where Ishmael was buried (see 1 Nephi 16:34).

Part Two deals with the place called Bountiful, where Nephi built his ship (see 1 Nephi 17:5–6). And finally, Part Three, which includes a 16-page section of 26 color photos on glossy paper, chronicles in very personal terms some of the inside details concerning their several expeditions to the Arabian coast in 1993.

This book is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Book of Mormon. The Astons have taken a serious interest in the place names described in 1 Nephi 16 and 17. This interest has galvanized them and has brought them closer to unlocking the heart of the matter than any previous researcher¹ by putting them directly in touch with the land and the people of the area in question.

The Astons begin by discussing the limitations of any work of this kind. They do this so that the uninformed will not, with unchecked zeal, overstate the claims of their work after reading it. They write,

As compelling as the findings of this new research are, the most that any branch of science (including archaeology) can offer is plausibility, or in other words the *likelihood* that something is true. Ultimate “proof” of the Book of Mormon remains exactly what Moroni said it was more than fifteen centuries ago—spiritual confirmation from God after reading it, pondering, and then praying sincerely to know for ourselves. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

This is sound. Yet with that premise in mind, the Astons proceed to present very compelling evidence that the place the Book of Mormon calls Nahom bears an authentic place name still present

¹ Previous studies on the question of the Lehite expedition from Jerusalem to Bountiful include Hugh Nibley’s *Lehi in the Desert* (first published serially in the *Improvement Era* beginning in January 1950); subsequently published in *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988); Lynn M. and Hope Hilton’s *In Search of Lehi’s Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), and Eugene England’s essay, “Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 143–56.

on the Arabian peninsula. They further show that neither Joseph Smith nor any person in New York living in the 1820s could have had access to the kind of information we find in the Book of Mormon, ergo Joseph Smith is a prophetic figure who translated an ancient document by the gift and power of God.

The areas of focus for the Astons relative to their research on Nahom include the following seven items: (1) Nahom was one place name that, unlike the valley of Lemuel, the river Laman, or Shazer, was not named by Lehi but rather was already so named prior to Lehi's visit. Thus we should not be surprised if such a place can be located on ancient (or modern) maps; (2) the name itself is rare enough to be found nowhere else on the Arabian peninsula; thus no debate of which Nahom is the correct candidate need occur; (3) the etymology behind the word Nehem/Nahom suggests a striking correlation with the circumstances attending the Lehite party. In fact, even though there are two distinct Semitic roots behind the word, either of their meanings ("to comfort, console, to be sorry" vs. "to roar, complain, or be hungry") is right at home with the Book of Mormon paradigm; (4) the dating of Arabia's Nehem predates the time of Lehi's sojourn; it would be strongly negative for the Astons' hypothesis if this were not the case; (5) the presence of burial grounds in the Arabian Nehem correlates precisely with the Book of Mormon account that Ishmael was buried at Nahom; (6) the climate of today's Arabia is not necessarily the same as the climate present in Lehi's day. Thus, ancient Nehem may have had a milder climate supporting a greater population; (7) coming from Jerusalem, the trade routes in Arabia turn eastward at Nehem. This correlates perfectly with the Book of Mormon text as given by Nephi, who was on the trade route: "And it came to pass that we did again take our journey in the wilderness; and we did travel nearly eastward from that time forth" (1 Nephi 17:1). Again, this information could not be had by those living in Joseph Smith's environment.

The conclusion by the Astons on the Nahom issue bears repeating: "The Book of Mormon reference to Nahom as an ancient place-name in southern Arabia can now truly be considered validated" (p. 25). I would heartily agree and would be

interested to see how the critics of the Book of Mormon respond to such evidence.²

In their treatment of Bountiful, the Astons scrutinize the text of the Book of Mormon for every clue they can attain about the place. They list twelve characteristics that should be present in any serious candidate for Bountiful (pp. 28–29). I hope that members of the Church who read their analysis will be as impressed as I was with such deep reading of the text.

The significance of the details in the Book of Mormon regarding Bountiful cannot be overstated:

By describing in such precise detail a fertile Arabian coastal location, as well as the route to get there from Jerusalem (complete with directions and even a place-name en route), Joseph Smith put his prophetic credibility very much on the line. Could this young, untraveled farmer in rural New York somehow have known about a fertile site on the coast of Arabia? Could a map or some writing other than the Nephite record have been a source for him? The answer is a clear no. (p. 29)

The Astons also rightly examine previous studies on the location of Bountiful. Of the six previously proposed candidates for Bountiful, they find that only one of the six, the Wadi Sayq in Oman, meets all of the criteria set forth by the text of the Book of Mormon itself. After describing why it was a largely unknown part of Arabia for so long, and after detailing their expedition, which led to the discovery of this land, the Astons write,

All of the effort and expense had been justified, we felt, with the discovery of Wadi Sayq, a place about which no literature made mention, no history was recorded,

² Most anti-Mormons claim that there is absolutely positively zero archaeological evidence supporting the Book of Mormon. This is even stated by critics who have read works by John Sorenson and others. In this genre, James White's *Letters to a Mormon Elder* (Southbridge, MA: Crown, 1990), 163–71, comes to mind, along with John Ankerberg and John Weldon's *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992), 275, 282–90.

and no proper scientific investigation had ever been made. It was a great thrill also when we determined that Wadi Sayq lies almost exactly “eastward” of Nehem in Yemen. So far as Bountiful was concerned, Latter-day Saints could for the first time demonstrate that such a place did in fact exist, just as Nephi described twenty-six hundred years ago. (p. 53.)

Even more impressive is the way in which they conclude their findings with respect to both Nahom and Bountiful:

The first location, Nehem/Nahom, is unique in that it may well be a place-name recorded in the Book of Mormon that has survived to the present day, in addition to being associated to other aspects of Nephi’s account. The second, Wadi Sayq/Khor Kharfot, impressively fits Nephi’s detailed description of Bountiful in ways that no other place does. Further, it is directionally linked with Nehem just as 1 Nephi 17:1 requires. Locating such a precisely defined place anywhere in the world would be a remarkable thing, but to find a site (and only one) exactly matching the criteria in that most unlikely and barren of all regions—Arabia—must appeal to the honest in heart as compelling evidence that Nephi’s account is based on reality. (p. 58)

In reading this book, I found myself engrossed in two different styles. The Astons present their hard research on the Book of Mormon in a fascinating, arresting way. I appreciated their thoroughness, for as I absorbed their data, questions would invariably come into my mind—questions that were answered by them, usually within a few paragraphs.³ But another element is present in this book, and this is the personal style, the very valuable subjective element. In some places this book read almost like a novel; the details of their journeyings are almost as gripping as are Lehi’s. I found myself amazed, amused, curious, and filled with suspense at various times as I read of their encounters with the

³ My only lament about this book reflects my own shortcomings: I wish the book included an appendix with a pronunciation guide, inasmuch as many of the proper names were of uncertain pronunciation.

heat, the cliffs, bandits, armed guards, bats, mosquitoes, and a manacled madman. I was pleased to see so many figures and illustrations. I was especially impressed with the quality of the color photographs. The last two color photographs I found especially delightful, for it was with them that I was able to see the faces of Warren and Michaela Aston, along with their colleagues and friends. And I felt in reading their story that they had become my friends as well.

I highly recommend this book to those interested in evidence supporting the Book of Mormon as a divinely inspired ancient document, or anyone who is looking for a good read. I believe the Astons have done all of us a great service by tenaciously pursuing—and realizing—their goals and dreams. Their work may not silence those critics who are not honest in heart, but it will cause all seekers after truth to recognize that the descriptions of Nahom and Bountiful in the Book of Mormon are in complete harmony with what we now know of the Arabia of Lehi's day.