



1-31-2003

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Brown, Kent S. (2003) "New Light: Nahom and the Eastward Turn," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 12 : No. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol12/iss1/15>

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title New Light: Nahom and the “Eastward” Turn

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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 111-12, 120.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract The account of the journey of Lehi’s family through the wilderness mentions one local name, Nahom, where Ishmael was buried. The discovery of the tribal name NHM on three altars from the seventh and sixth centuries BC provides a likely location for that stopping point on their trip. This site is located at the bend of the incense trail that went in the opposite direction of Lehi’s group—westward to NHM and then turning northward.



NEW LIGHT

Nahom and the “Eastward” Turn

Nephi preserves few geographic details in the rather spare narrative of his first book. He writes about Jerusalem, the Red Sea, and “the sea, which we called Irreantum” (1 Nephi 17:5). This last sea, of course, is the Indian Ocean, whose waters wash against the southern shore of Arabia.

From his party’s journey, Nephi also notes stopping places that received their names from his father, notably the Valley of Lemuel and Shazer (see 1 Nephi 2:10, 14; 16:13). These latter locales are more difficult to pinpoint because we have nothing to go on except Nephi’s passing references to each place. Moreover, he does

not preserve local names if there were any, although the Valley of Lemuel may well be the modern Wadi Taysyib al-Ism (Valley of the Good Name) in northwest Arabia.¹

In one instance, however, Nephi does preserve a local name, that of Nahom, the burial place of Ishmael, his father-in-law. Nephi writes in the passive, “the



Valley of Nahom/Nihm, looking east. (Photo by S. Kent Brown)

place which was called Nahom,” clearly indicating that local people had already named the place. That this area lay in southern Arabia has been certified by recent *Journal* publications that have featured three inscribed limestone altars discovered by a German archaeological team in the ruined temple of Barʿan in Marib, Yemen.² Here a person finds the tribal name NHM noted on all three altars, which were donated by a certain “Biʿathar, son of Sawād, son of Nawʿân, the Nihmite.” (In Semitic languages, one deals with consonants rather than vowels, in this case *NHM*.)

Such discoveries demonstrate as firmly as possible by archaeological means the existence of the tribal name NHM in that part of Arabia in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., the general dates assigned to the carving of the altars by the excavators.³ In the view of one recent commentator, the discovery of the altars amounts to “the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.”⁴

It is important to emphasize that in the world of archaeology, written inscriptions are the evidence most sought after because they often establish names and dates, key ingredients for interpreting the past. The inscriptions on the three altars from the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., all

mentioning the NHM tribe, prove beyond doubt the existence of this name in that region of Yemen during the first half of the first millennium B.C. when Nephi’s party was on the move.

The case for Nahom, or NHM, in this area is made even more tight by recent study. It has become clearly apparent from Nephi’s note—“we did travel nearly eastward” from Nahom (1 Nephi 17:1)—that he and his party not only had stayed in the NHM tribal area, burying Ishmael there, but also were following or shadowing the incense trail, a trading road that by then offered an infrastructure of wells and fodder to travelers and their animals. From the general region of the NHM tribe, all roads turned east. How so? Across the Ramlat Sabʿatayn desert, east of this tribal region and east of Marib, lay the city of Shabwah, now in ruins. By ancient Arabian law, it was to this city that all incense harvested in the highlands of southern Arabia was carried for inventorying, weighing, and taxing. In addition, traders made gifts of incense to the temples at Shabwah.⁵ After this process, traders loaded the incense and other goods onto camels and shipped them toward the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian areas, traveling at first westward and then, after reaching the edges

of the region of the NHM tribe, turning northward (these directions are exactly opposite from those that Nephi and his party followed). Even the daunting shortcuts across the Ramlat Sabʿatayn desert, which left travelers without water for 150 miles, ran generally east–west. What is important for our purposes is the fact that the “eastward” turn of Nephi’s narrative does not show up in any known ancient source, including Pliny the Elder’s famous description of the incense-growing lands of Arabia. In a word, no one knew of this eastward turn in the incense trail except persons who had traveled it or who lived in that territory. This kind of detail in the Book of Mormon narrative, combined with the reference to Nahom, is information that was unavailable in Joseph Smith’s day and thus stands as compelling evidence of the antiquity of the text. —ED.

(This review is based on the recently published study by S. Kent Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” in *Evidences and Echoes of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002], 55–125, especially 81–85, 88–90.) ❏

Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 75–76; and Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, 2 vols. in 1, with an introduction by T. E. Lawrence (New York: Random House, 1936), 1:88.

2. See S. Kent Brown, “The Place Which Was Called Nahom: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 66–68; and Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *JBMS* 10/2 (2001): 56–61.
3. See Burkhard Vogt, “Les temples de Ma’rib,” in *Yémen: au pays de la reine de Saba* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 144; see also the preliminary report by Burkhard Vogt et al., “Arsh Bilqis”—*Der Temple des Almaqah von Bar’an in Marib* (Sana’a, Yemen, 2000).
4. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 120.
5. On these ancient laws, see Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1981), 169–70, 181, 183–84. Concerning the taxation of incense and the gifts to the temples, see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 12.32 (§63).

[New Light]

Nahom and the “Eastward” Turn

1. Consult George D. Potter, “A New Candidate in Arabia for the Valley of Lemuel,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 54–63. On a possible location for Shazer, see Lynn M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi’s Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 77. Concerning the naming of places by travelers, see Hugh W.