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# New Light: The Queen of Sheba, Skyscraper Architecture, and Lehi's Dream

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**Author(s)**

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**Abstract** The Book of Mormon prophet Lehi received a vision commonly referred to as the tree of life. Within that vision, he observes a building that he describes as "strange." A possible reason Lehi labels it this way is that the architecture of the building was dissimilar to the architecture popular in Jerusalem at the time. The building in Lehi's dream was plausibly structured similar to the buildings found in south Arabia during Lehi's time. By studying the architectural styles of Jerusalem and south Arabia, one can better evaluate and understand the vision of the tree of life.



## NEW LIGHT

### The Queen of Sheba, Skyscraper Architecture, and Lehi's Dream

The recently closed Queen of Sheba exhibition of ancient treasures from Yemen, which was showing at the British Museum (9 June–13 October 2002), featured artifacts that replicated cer-

tain architectural aspects from large buildings, including temples. Importantly, among the artifacts was the seventh-century B.C. votive altar that preserves the name Nahom/Nihm (see 1 Nephi 16:34) and has been featured previously in the *Journal*.<sup>1</sup> That altar and other decorative pieces mirror the squarish nature of the buildings of

ancient Yemen—there were few if any arches, circles, or curved lines.

Why touch on this point? Because “the great and spacious building” of Lehi’s dream is one of only two visual aspects that he calls “strange” (1 Nephi 8:26, 33).<sup>2</sup> Why would Lehi call the building strange unless it had a basis in reality? We suggest that it does.



An aerial view of the skyscrapers of modern Shibam, in the Hadhramaut Valley of Yemen. Courtesy John J. Nowell and Zodiac Publishing.

At this point we have to be clear about one important point: Lehi's dream was prophetic throughout. In the long view, for example, he beheld the Messiah, who was to come "six hundred years" later, as well as the prophet who would announce and baptize him (see 1 Nephi 10:4, 8–9). In the short view, he foresaw his trek into the wilderness with the aid of divine help while traveling at night through "a dark and dreary waste" (see 8:4–7). Among other topographical features that Lehi and Sariah and their party would encounter as they moved south into Arabia were deep wadis or canyons—called variously "terrible gulf" or "awful gulf"—that would fill with mud and debris—"filthy water"—after seasonal rainstorms (12:16, 18; 15:28).

Now we return to the question, Why does Lehi call the building strange? The first and most natural answer is that its appearance, its architecture, was unfamiliar to Lehi. Even though he may well have traveled to remote and interesting destinations, he had evidently not seen all of the cultural peculiarities of his extended world. Most architectural influences in the Jerusalem area came from Egypt and Phoenicia, where the architecture is typically one or two stories in height.<sup>3</sup> This is an important point because, in contrast, the architecture of south Arabia, where Lehi and Sariah traveled, featured skyscrapers. To a person from Jerusalem, these skyscrapers would have been unusual, even strange. Such skyscrapers continue

to modern times.<sup>4</sup> In this connection we note with interest that Lehi describes the "spacious building" of his dream—it probably had a broad floor plan—as standing "as it were in the air, high above the earth" (1 Nephi 8:26). Skyscraper architecture would seem to be a match, even in a heaven-sent dream wherein objects and scenes are highly symbolic.

How do we know that buildings in ancient south Arabia reached significant heights? After all, tall buildings have not survived. On the basis of archaeological discoveries at the ancient site of Shabwah in the 1970s, the French team concluded that the foundations of public buildings supported structures that rose four and five stories into the air. (None of the upper stories had survived; it was the design of the foundations that provided the decisive clues.) What is most striking is the fact that these early foundations went back to the eighth century B.C. and earlier, more than 100 years before Lehi and Sariah undertook their memorable trek. That is not all. Building inscriptions discovered at other ancient sites in the region "indicate the number of floors within houses as three or four, with up to six in [the town of] Zafār." That is, private dwellings also rose several stories into the air. What is more, these inscriptions that "provide the names of the owners" of the buildings also date from the eighth century B.C.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to Lehi's dream, we ask how such tall buildings would appear to Lehi to be "in the air,

high above the earth" (1 Nephi 8:26). One answer is that travelers in the deserts of Arabia typically traveled at night because of the heat and because of the danger of marauders.<sup>6</sup> That is exactly what Lehi does at the beginning of his dream, for the wilderness through which he travels with his guide is "dark" (1 Nephi 8:4, 7). The first row of windows in tall buildings was high enough to offer safety to inhabitants. At night, light from the windows of these buildings made them appear as if suspended in the air.

In conclusion, Lehi evidently foresaw an aspect of ancient architecture that was by his day a characteristic of buildings in south Arabia and was unique in that part of the world. Contemporary buildings there "stood as it were in the air" (1 Nephi 8:26), rising to imposing heights of five and six stories. Did contemporaries of Joseph Smith know about this building feature of the ancient past? The answer has to be no. Nor did Joseph Smith. Instead, it was Lehi, who beheld such a structure in his vision, and members of his party traveling through the region, who saw this "strange" appearance of skyscraper buildings. ■

This review is based on the recently published study of S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 55–125, especially pp. 68–69.

[New Light]

**The Queen of Sheba, Skyscraper  
Architecture, and Lehi's Dream**

1. See S. Kent Brown, "The Place That 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 (2002): 56–61.
2. The other consists of the "strange roads" that lead unwary travelers to become "lost" (1 Nephi 8:32).
3. Except for buildings that had a stone and rubble core, such as the hanging gardens of Babylon, few if any buildings ever reached even a second story. See Michael Roaf, "Palaces and Temples in Ancient

Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1:423–41, especially p. 434; and Elizabeth C. Stone, "House: Mesopotamian Houses," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers et al. (New York: Oxford, 1997), 3:90–94.

4. In modern Shibam, Yemen, the tall buildings made of mud bricks with supporting inner timbers have employed the same construction technology as that used anciently and have not stood the test of time. At the moment, virtually all of the tall buildings in Shibam are abandoned because they are now on the verge of collapse, though they are under the care of UNESCO.
5. Consult Jean-François Breton, "Architecture," in *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, ed. St John Simpson (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 142–48; the quotations are from p. 143.
6. For travel at night in antiquity, see Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.45. For a modern report, consult Charles Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (New York: Random House, 1936), 1:86, 257.