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Abstract Scholars have presented and defended different viewpoints concerning the Lehite journey and the location of Nephi's Bountiful. Aston explains that some of these arguments contain factual errors, such as claims regarding fertility and timber for Nephi's ship and a lack of accounting for all possibilities. Discrepancies in theories and differences in opinion do not lessen the worth of all that has been found in Arabia and the supported theories, but acknowledging the sometimes contrary data will aid the search for the best candidate for Nephi's Bountiful.



Identifying Our Best Candidate for Nephi's Bountiful

Warren P. Aston

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article is a response to Richard Wellington and George Potter, "Lehi's Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi's Harbor," JBMS 15/2 (2006): 26–43, and W. Revell Phillips, "Mughsayl: Another Candidate for Land Bountiful," JBMS 16/2 (2007): 48–59.

Above: Reeds line the sea inlet at Khor Mughsayl, a candidate location for Nephi's "place Bountiful" in southern Oman. All photographs in this article by Warren P. Aston.

PUBLICATION OF ISSUE 15/2 of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* was a landmark event in Old World studies of the Book of Mormon. Encouragingly, it illustrates what Daniel McKinlay's article calls the "brightening light" being shed on Lehi and Sariah's odyssey. Just thirty years ago the most optimistic of us could not have imagined how much of that journey can now be plausibly situated in the real world.

Researchers generally agree that Nephi's Bountiful must lie somewhere on the fertile southern coast of Oman, which stretches a short distance into Yemen. Wellington and Potter discuss the most promising specific locations identified to date: Khor (inlet) Rori and Khor Kharfot. W. Revell Phillips proposes a third possibility, Khor Mughsayl, which lies between the other two.¹

Having explored the entire east coast of Yemen and Oman, I could claim, I suppose, that at some stage I must certainly have been in the original Bountiful. However, at no time since completing that survey in 1992 have I ever claimed that any particular location was Bountiful. My interest remains what it has always been—to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon’s claimed origins are completely *plausible*. I have no expectation that research will ever demonstrate more than that.

The Book of Mormon deserves to be understood using the best data available. We need to bring accuracy and clarity to our studies, especially when discussing geography, because most Church members rely on others for information of distant places. Nephi’s account is far more sophisticated and informative than it first appears, and if we ignore its plain statements the waters are indeed muddied.

Journal articles have already made arguments for each viewpoint concerning the Lehigh journey, and they need not be repeated. However, where *factual* errors exist, as I believe they do in these articles, they must be pointed out. I offer the following corrections toward that end.

Nahom

Nahom, Ishmael’s burial place, also marked the major change in travel direction in the journey to Bountiful (see 1 Nephi 17:1). Although the discovery of the Bar’an altar texts means that Nahom’s location is now archaeologically attested, Wellington and Potter assert that there are no less than *five* places in Yemen bearing the name (p. 32). Nihm, however, is a large (modern) administrative area of northwest Yemen named after its principal tribe. It includes a large chunk of desert land in the Wadi Jawf as well as a high plateau. Although Wellington and Potter point out various sites bearing the name NHM (as well as variant spellings using the consonants), it is a mistake to conclude that there are separate places called NHM. They are all simply features of one tribal area—only one south Arabian location has the name NHM.²

Wellington and Potter also use a preliminary version of the altar text that incorrectly designates the altar donor and his tribe as the “tribe Naw’, from Nihm” (p. 33). The correct translation states that the donor was the son of Naw’um, who was of Nihm.³ It is also confusing to state that the first altar was found at the “Bar’an temple” and the second at the

“Temple of the Moon Goddess” (p. 33), thus implying different locations. The authors do not mention the third altar, but, in any event, all three were recovered at the *same* location—the Ilmaqah temple of Bar’an at Marib. Finally, the dating given for the second altar is incorrect: all the altars date between the seventh and sixth centuries BC.⁴

Bountiful

Access from Nahom

Wellington and Potter, as well as S. Kent Brown, posit a route to Bountiful through *Shisr*, an oasis widely trumpeted some years ago as the fabled lost city of Ubar. Archaeologist Juris Zarins, however, long ago backed away from this claim,⁵ and other scholars remain convinced that there was never any substantial overland trade route from Dhofar at any time.⁶ Although highly relevant, these revised and opposing scholarly viewpoints are not noted by any of the authors.

Accounting for All Possibilities

Wellington and Potter make no attempt to assess all possibilities for Bountiful. After stating that they visited nine inlets besides Khor Rori (their candidate), the authors admit that the most westerly was only six miles west of Salalah (p. 41). Driving only 20 minutes farther west would have brought them to Mughsayl and, 90 minutes farther, to Wadi Sayq and Khor Kharfot, all on paved roads. Yet they do not even consider Kharfot—demonstrably the most fertile coastal location in Arabia—a candidate for Bountiful (p. 42).⁷

Fertility

Bountiful was named for “its much fruit and also wild honey” (1 Nephi 17:5 and again in v. 6). And, since the Lord led the Lehighes there primarily to build a ship, availability of suitable timber is surely no small factor. However, the trees we would expect to see at Khor Rori and at Mughsayl are nowhere to be found. These candidates thus lack the fertility described by Nephi, and Wellington and Potter seem to downplay the scriptural basis for the name *Bountiful* in several ways. First, in a previous publication, they apparently used a green filter to enhance the photo of a site.⁸ Next, they use a photo of an inland wadi (rather than of Khor Rori itself) to suggest trees, vegetation, and wildlife (p. 43). They also maintain that the modern plantations

of such species as banana, coconut, mango, and papaya in Salalah could account for the “much fruit” Nephi mentions. (Phillips argues likewise.)

Unfortunately, most of these fruits are modern imports and are not native to the area.⁹ In 21 years of visiting Salalah, I have seen these irrigated plantations grow in size and variety. But Nephi’s text must be approached from the perspectives of an ancient inhabitant of Jerusalem concluding a long, difficult desert journey. “Much fruit” does not necessarily require the great *variety* of modern, colorful species found in the local supermarket. Moreover, anyone visiting Khor Kharfot today can indeed

see “much fruit” still growing wild: an abundance of figs, one of the most important ancient fruits in the Near East, with tamarinds, dates, and a variety of edible nuts, berries, and vegetables. I therefore believe that repeated assertions that only Salalah is fertile (Phillips, pp. 53, 55) are not accurate. Indeed, I continue to maintain that Kharfot is the most naturally fertile location on the eastern Arabian coast.

Timber for Nephi's Ship

All three authors claim that Nephi must have purchased imported timber to construct his ship. Teak timber from India was used in distant northern Oman since ancient times; however, the authors fail to mention that there is no evidence of shipbuilding in *southern* Oman at any time.¹⁰ Phillips claims that Oman has no trees suitable for planking (p. 55), and Wellington and Potter speculate that “Nephi would have needed to haul all of these heavy imported goods [such as timber] to Khor Kharfot” (p. 42) over the mountains from Salalah. This makes no sense given the timber trees already extant at Kharfot. The authors ignore the extensive photography of tall native hardwood trees and fruits growing at Kharfot, published in my 1994 book and in my *JBMS* article, both of which they themselves reference. (See Wellington and Potter, pp. 113–16 nn. 3, 49, 71, 111 and Phillips, p. 97 n. 2.)

Nephi's Port

In discussing Nephi’s preparation for a sea voyage, Wellington and Potter examine the “maritime resources” needed, defined by them as a harbor, materials and labor needed to build a ship, and “seamanship skills” required to sail it. The authors reveal their approach in this quote: “Even with the inspiration of the Lord, it was *simply impossible* for Nephi to have sailed to the New World without training” (p. 42, emphasis added). Thus, they have Nephi helped by local shipbuilders and taught by experienced sailors who perhaps joined the crew.

Wellington and Potter intimate that because Khor Kharfot is presently closed to the ocean by a sandbar, it cannot be Bountiful, although they acknowledge that Khor Rori is also closed. They then state that Kharfot, a place I know intimately,

Timber trees grow beside the sea inlet a short distance from the beach at Khor Kharfot.





Khor Rori's large sea inlet viewed from the ruins of the city-port of Sumhurum, which dates to the third century BC.

is “very narrow and the floor is strewn with huge boulders” (p. 42). Phillips also speaks about the Kharfot inlet as the smallest of the three sites, although he does not explain why that would be significant. Such claims make no sense to me. Kharfot’s inlet is *not* strewn with huge boulders; its width of a hundred or so feet is surely adequate to maneuver a ship, and its depth of about 30 feet is plenty for even a deep draft. Additionally, most of these assumptions fail if a raft-style craft were built rather than a conventional ship, a point that Phillips recognizes (p. 56). Wellington and Potter summarize their candidate’s strength as being “the only established large port in Dhofar in Nephi’s time.” (p. 43). They do not, however, discuss the fact that Khor Rori is believed not to have been a port in Nephi’s day, which would invalidate their claims.¹¹

Readers must decide if these assertions find any echoes in Nephi’s straightforward account telling us that his *brothers* worked with him, in a place almost certainly *uninhabited*,¹² that he was instructed of the *Lord* often, that he neither worked the timbers nor built his vessel “after the manner of men,” and that he was directionally and spiritually led by the *Liahona* (1 Nephi 18:2; see also 1 Nephi 17:7, 8; 18:1–4, 12, 21–22).¹³

Nephi’s Mount and Coastal Access

Although Khor Rori lacks a mount where Nephi could have prayed “oft” (1 Nephi 18:3), Wellington and Potter claim that the “slopes of the highest peak in southern Oman are only two miles to the north” (p. 37). This is misleading because Mount Samhan is actually more than 25 miles distant and is not even



Khor Kharfot is overlooked by a peak with a small plateau at its base. Opposite: The original sea inlet at Khor Kharfot is defined by the greenery on the wadi floor extending inland.

visible from the Khor Rori area,¹⁴ requiring Nephi to walk 50-plus miles round-trip to pray often (“*in the mountain*” incidentally, not merely on a distant slope—see 1 Nephi 17: 7; 18:3).

In rejecting Kharfot as the possible site of Bountiful, Phillips claims that it “has truly difficult access from the interior,” with “huge boulders and vegetation that block the canyon floor” (p. 55) of Wadi Sayq (“River Valley”), which leads from the interior desert. While it is true that Latter-day Saint tour groups wishing to see all Bountiful possibilities reach Kharfot by sea simply because it is easier than going by land, walking in to Kharfot is nevertheless quite possible. I have done so several times. Even after the 2600-plus monsoonal floods that have occurred since Lehi’s time, choke-points of accumulated boulders and abundant vegetation do not deter exploration by serious researchers any more than they would have turned away a prophet-led group long ago.

I believe the most accurate comparison of the three inlets in Nephi’s day is as follows:

- *Khor Rori* was well populated at the beginning of the incense trade, thus offering a source of local labor, but likely lacking fruit and certainly lacking a nearby mountain. Shipbuilding timber would have to have been imported from elsewhere.
- *Khor Mughsayl* likely had at least a small population and may have been involved in the trade routes. It has small, nearby hills, but lacks both fruit and timber, which would have to have been imported from elsewhere.
- *Khor Kharfot* was removed from the trade route and thus almost certainly *unpopulated*. Timber trees and wild fruit grow near the sea, and a distinct mountain overlooks the bay. It remains the most fertile coastal location in Arabia.

Conclusion

No reader should feel that errors or differences in opinion in any way diminish the significance of what has been found in Arabia; such differences are to be expected in any scholarly effort. One can even see that *several* locations (all within a few miles of each other) being proposed as Bountiful actually strengthens the Book of Mormon's claims. None of these places was known in Joseph Smith's 1829 environment; indeed, we are only now investigating them with the tools of science.

I leave the final word with the Prophet Joseph Smith. Writing in 1844 of evidences for the work restored through him, he stated that their truth would be made manifest by "proving contraries."¹⁵ As we sift sometimes contrary but always *factual* data into the future, indications of the Book of Mormon's divine origin will continue to unfold. ■

Notes

1. Aware of Phillips' forthcoming article, I made another extended examination of Mughsayl for two days in February 2008 to ensure that I had not overlooked anything with respect to its qualities as a candidate for Bountiful. I found nothing new.
2. At least one of the four "new" locations listed is merely a colloquialism: Jabal Naham ("Mt. Naham") is actually Mt. Harim, located in the Nihm tribal area next to Mele, the ancient capital of Nihm. Because the mountain lies within the NHM area, local people can quite easily refer to it as Mt. NHM, and that name can find its way onto a map. Arabian mapping in some areas, including Yemen, is notoriously inconsistent and often hard to follow. The bottom line, however, is that the name NHM is found only once in southern Arabia, even though a mountain, a valley, and a hill within the area also have NHM in their name, formal or otherwise. The site of Provo offers a useful analogy: even though people speak of Provo Canyon, the Provo River, Provo city, and the Provo cemetery, for example, there is still only one place called Provo, not several.
3. Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *JBMS* 10/2 (2001): 59.
4. Institut du monde arabe, *Yémen au pays de la reine de Saba?* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 144. The editor of the volume, Christian Robin, is a professional archaeologist who has dated the temple site and altars to between the seventh and sixth centuries BC. I therefore believe that Yusuf Abdullah, the source cited by Wellington and Potter (p. 114 n. 41), is either mistaken or misquoted—or perhaps simply generalizing—in mentioning the seventh or eighth centuries BC.



5. Zarins eventually concluded that Shisr does not represent Ubar. See his "Atlantis of the Sands" in *Archaeology* 50/3 (1997): 51–53. In his more recent "Environmental Disruption and Human Response," in *Environmental Disaster and the Archaeology of Human Response, Anthropological Papers*, ed. Garth Bawden and Richard M. Reyecraft (Albuquerque: Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, 2000), 7:35–49, Zarins suggests that modern Habarut may be Ubar.
H. Stewart Edgell contends that Ubar is essentially mythical and makes arguments against any significant historical role for Shisr beyond that of a small caravansary. See "The Myth of the 'Lost City of the Arabian Sands'" in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* (2004), 34:105–20.
6. For carefully reasoned examinations of the issues involved, see Nigel Groom's "Oman and the Emirates in Ptolemy's Map," in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5 (1994): 198–214, and "The Road to Ubar"—Pros and Cons," in *Bulletin of the Society for Arabian Studies* 5 (2000): 42–43. Groom concludes that the Shisr site provides no new evidence of overland trade routes from Dhofar.
7. As an aside, this is somewhat ironic because I examined Khor Rori on my first visit to Oman in 1987 and was unable to reconcile it with Nephi's description. Seeing the site triggered my ground survey of the entire eastern Arabian coast made from 1988 to 1992. Khor Kharfot is the last remnant of deciduous tropical woodland remaining in Oman. It's unique fertility drew the attention of botanists years before any Latter-day Saint knew of the site. See Anthony Miller and Miranda Morris, "The Scientific Results of the Oman Flora and Fauna Survey—1977 (Dhofar)" in *Journal of Oman Studies* (Muscat: Ministry of National Heritage & Culture, 1980): Special Report 2, which includes photography of Kharfot.
8. The rocks look green in some pictures. See especially the picture of Khor Rori lagoon in Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 131.
9. See Shahina Ghazanfar, *A Vernacular Index of the Plants of Oman* (Muscat, Oman: Al Roya, 2001), which documents native flora. Dr. Ghazanfar is an Omani national currently serving as a curator at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England.
10. See Alessandra Avanzini, ed., *A Port in Arabia between Rome and the Indian Ocean (3rd C. BC – 5th C. AD): Khor Rori Report 2* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2008). This title reflects the archaeological team's firm dating—and the team has worked at Khor Rori since 1997.
11. See Avanzini, *Khor Rori Report 2*. Additionally, Juris Zarins notes in his seminal *The Land of Incense: Archaeological Work in the Governorate of Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman, 1990–1995* (Muscat, Oman: Sultan Qaboos University, 2001), 134, that Dhofar graffiti depicting ships may simply record observations of passing ships. He also notes that, in any case, the graffiti likely dates no earlier than 300 BC.
12. I briefly outline my position in my article "Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah: 'Truth Shall Spring out of the Earth,'" *JBMS* 15/2 (2006): 8–25.
13. Commentators have often neglected the significance of the sacred "writing" appearing on the Liahona from time to time (see 1 Nephi 16:27–29), something that was separate from the directions indicated by the pointers.
14. Mt. Samhan is situated at 17° 24' N and 54° 53' E and Khor Rori at 17° 2' N and 54° 27' E, separated by a distance of more than 25 miles in a straight line. Of course, the distance would be considerably farther when walking and climbing.
15. *History of the Church*, 6:428.