



1-31-2011

On Lehi's Trail: Nahom, Ishmael's Burial Place

Stephen D. Ricks

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Ricks, Stephen D. (2011) "On Lehi's Trail: Nahom, Ishmael's Burial Place," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 20 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol20/iss1/5>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title On Lehi's Trail: Nahom, Ishmael's Burial Place

Author(s) Stephen D. Ricks

Reference *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/1 (2011): 66-68.

ISSN 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

Abstract Nahom, a proper name given as the burial place of Ishmael in 1 Nephi 16:34, compellingly correlates archaeologically, geographically, and historically to the site of Nehem on the Arabian peninsula. However, as this article exhibits, some of the linguistic and etymological evidence given to connect the Book of Mormon Nahom to the Arabian Nehem is somewhat problematic.



The altar containing the name *Nahom* on the extreme left. Photograph courtesy of David Johnson.

ON LEHI'S TRAIL: NAHOM,

STEPHEN D. RICKS

Some who have written about the Book of Mormon have included *Nahom* in the list of proper names that enhance the likelihood of this book as a historically authentic ancient document. They are right, but for archaeological, geographical, and historical reasons, not necessarily linguistic or etymological, as has been previously argued.

The story begins in 1978, when the late Ross T. Christensen observed in a brief contribution to the August 1978 *Ensign* that the place-name *Nehem*¹ was cited on a map published in 1772 by Carsten

Niebuhr, who accompanied the Danish expedition to map the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula.² This was by no means the earliest published map with the name *Nehem* on it. Twenty years earlier, in 1751, Jean Baptiste D'Anville published a map of the Arabian Peninsula containing the place-name *Nehem*.³ On both maps *Nehem* is located about 35 miles northeast of Sana'a, the modern capital of Yemen. *Nehem* is also north of Ma'rib, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Saba.

This discovery was extremely interesting news for Latter-day Saints because of its possible connection to the Book of Mormon place-name *Nahom*, mentioned in 1 Nephi 16:34 as the burial place of Ishmael. Subsequent inquiries and on-site investigations by Warren and Michaela Aston,⁴ S. Kent

FROM THE EDITOR:

Nahom, a proper name given to the burial place of Ishmael in 1 Nephi 16:34, fits a Book of Mormon milieu based on compelling archaeological, geographical, and historical—and to a lesser extent linguistic and etymological—considerations.

Brown,⁵ and others⁶ have advanced our understanding of the identity and location of Nehem in the Arabian desert. Still, Nehem is not solely a modern location but can also be seen as an ancient site.⁷ The identification of the ancient name *n̄hm* with the modern place-name *Nehem* is supported by recent studies. S. Kent Brown has discussed three altar inscriptions on display at the Ma'rib Antiquities Museum in Sana'a, Yemen, containing *n̄hm* as a tribal name dating from the seventh to sixth centuries BC—roughly the time period when Lehi's family was traveling through the area.⁸ *N̄hm* appears as a place-name and as a tribal name in southwestern Arabia in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period in the Arab antiquarian al-Hamdānī's *al-Iklil*⁹ and in his *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-'Arab*.¹⁰ If, as Robert Wilson observes, there is minimal movement among the tribes over time,¹¹

sources for Nehem, *n̄hm* and *n̄hm*. Therefore, Nahom as the realization of the southwest Arabian proper name *n̄hm* is eminently plausible. In the ancient Sabaeen and Qatabanian dialects of southern Arabia, *n̄hm* is again the only root of the three possibilities that appears, with meanings of “pecked masonry” or “stone dressing.”¹⁴

However, some etymologies proposed by Latter-day Saints for Nahom based on the context in 1 Nephi 16 pose difficulties. The Semitic roots suggested in 1950 for Nahom by Hugh Nibley (the Arabic *naḥama*, “to sigh or moan”; and the Hebrew root *n̄hm*, “to comfort or console”)¹⁵ both fit the context of this passage. But these etymologies are not reflected in the geographic name *Nehem* because both contain the dotted *h*, not the simple *h*. Still, it is possible that the name *Nahom* served as the basis of a play on words by Lehi's

ISHMAEL'S BURIAL PLACE

the region now known as Nehem may well have had that or a similar name in antiquity.

The main issue of equating *n̄hm* with the Book of Mormon Nahom on linguistic grounds is the consonant *h*. The Semitic languages have three different consonants represented in English by *h*, each with its own unique Semitic pronunciation. With diacritical marks, the three sounds are represented as *h*, a voiceless laryngeal (to linguists) or simple *h* (to Semitists) (pronounced as the *h* in *hat*); *ḥ*, a voiceless pharyngeal or dot-*h* (pronounced as the *h* in *hue*); and *ḥ*, a voiceless guttural fricative or hook-*h* (pronounced as the *ch* in the Scottish dialect word *loch*). Because Western Europeans are generally not familiar with the distinction between these three consonants, Carsten Niebuhr was led to admit, “I have had no small difficulty in writing down these names; both from the diversity of dialects in the country, and from the indistinct pronunciation of those from whom I was obliged to ask them.”¹²

In G. Lankester Harding's *Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions*,¹³ the only entries for place-names *n̄hm* contain for the middle consonant a voiceless laryngeal (simple *h*). There are no proper nouns listed for the other two potential

party that Nephi recorded. Likewise, the Hebrew root *n̄hm*, meaning “to mourn” (but “to roar” in Isaiah 5:29–30),¹⁶ attested in Ezekiel 24:23 and Proverbs 5:11, may reflect the actions of the daughters of Ishmael in 1 Nephi 16:35, who did “mourn exceedingly.” Thus, Book of Mormon *Nahom* could have an etymological connection “to mourn, to groan,” but the place-name *Nehem* of the Arabian Peninsula might have had a different etymology. Nahom is thus a striking fit as a Book of Mormon proper name based on archaeological, geographical, historical, and, to a lesser extent, on linguistic or etymological considerations. ■



Stephen D. Ricks earned his PhD at the University of California at Berkeley and Graduate Theological Union. He is professor of Hebrew and cognate learning at Brigham Young University. At present he is involved in the Book of Mormon proper names project. His current research interests include the ancient temple in the Near East and south Asia, pre-Islamic Arabia, and Arab-Muslim stories of the Israelite prophets.

NOTES

1. Niebuhr's map has *Nehhm*, possibly a typographical error for *Nehem*, as other pre- and post-Niebuhr maps spell the place-name.
2. Ross T. Christensen, "The Place Called Nahom," *Ensign*, August 1978, 73.
3. James Gee, "The Nahom Maps," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 17/1 (2008): 40-57.
4. 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); Aston and Aston, "Lehi's Trail and Nahom Revisited," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 47-50; Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 56-61; Aston, "Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah: 'Truth Shall Spring Out of the Earth,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 8-25.
5. S. Kent Brown, "'The Place That Was Called Nahom': New Light from Ancient Yemen," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 66-68; Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 55-125; S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson, eds., *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006) and the *Journey of Faith* DVD (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2006).
6. George D. Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New, Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003); Richard Wellington and George Potter, "Lehi's Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi's Harbor," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 26-43; David A. LeFevre, "We Did Again Take Our Journey," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 58-67; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "An Archaeologist's View," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 68-77.
7. Dan Vogel, writing in the misleadingly named volume *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* and responding to two books by LDS authors about Lehi's journey in the Arabian desert, has objected to the dating of the Arabian word containing the consonants NHM: "There is no evidence dating the Arabian NHM before A.D. 600, let alone 600 B.C." (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 609. It should be noted, however, that Burkhard Vogt, perhaps unaware of its implications for the Book of Mormon, dates an altar having the initial letters NHM(yn) to the seventh to sixth centuries BC. Vogt, "Les temples de Ma'rib," in *Yémen: au pays de la reine de Saba* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 144. This is not insignificant since Vogel's book was published in 2004, while Vogt's contribution was published in 1997.
8. Brown, "New Light from Arabia," 81-82.
9. Al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl*, ed. Nabih Faris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 35, 94.
10. Al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifāt Jazīrat al-'Arab*, ed. David H. Müller (repr. Leiden: Brill, 1968), 49, line 9; 81, line 4, 8, 11; 83, line 8, 9; 109, line 26; 110, line 2, 4 126, line 10; 135, line 19, 22; 167, line 15-20; 168, line 10, 11, where *nhm* is listed as either the name of a "region, territory" (Ar. *balad*) or a "tribe" (Ar. *qabīla*); Jawad 'Alī, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Ta'rikh al-'Arab qabla al-Islām* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm lil-Malayin, 1969-73), 2:414, gives *Nhm* as the name of a "region" (Ar. *arḍ*) during the period of the "mukarribs and the [ancient] kingdom of Saba" (Ar. *fī ayyām al-mukarribina wa-fī ayyām mulūk Saba*?); he also gives *Nhm* as a place-name, *Al-Mufaṣṣal*, 4:187 and 7:462.
11. Robert Wilson, "Al-Hamdānī's Description of Ḥāshid and Bakīl," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 11 (1981): 95, 99.
12. Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia and Other Countries in the East*, trans. Robert Heron, 2nd ed. (Perth: Morison, 1799), 1:35. It was probably not the case that Niebuhr's informants used "indistinct pronunciation," but rather that he could not hear distinctly what they clearly enunciated.
13. G. Lankester Harding's *Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 602.
14. "Pecked masonry" is given as a definition of nouns based on the ancient South Arabian root NHM in Joan C. Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic Sabaean Dialect* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982), 296; and as "stone dressing" in Stephen D. Ricks, *Lexicon of Inscriptions Qatabanian* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989), 103.
15. Hugh W. Nibley, "Lehi in the Desert," *Improvement Era*, June 1950, 517; Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 90-91; Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 79.
16. D. J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 5:631.