



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 21 | Number 2

Article 9

2009

Lehi and Local Color

Stephen D. Ricks

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Ricks, Stephen D. (2009) "Lehi and Local Color," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol21/iss2/9>

This Book of Mormon is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 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 Lehi and Local Color

Author(s) Stephen D. Ricks

Reference *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 169-77.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land* (2006), edited by S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson.

LEHI AND LOCAL COLOR

Stephen D. Ricks

Review of S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson, eds. *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land*. Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2006. x + 172 pp., with appendixes. \$29.95.

Perhaps the most popular and influential publication of FARMS is John Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*.¹ In this book Sorenson gives classic expression to the "limited geography" hypothesis: the Book of Mormon takes place not on the American continents stretching from Tierra del Fuego to Hudson Bay, but in a very restricted area in what is now southern Mexico and Central America. So influential has Sorenson's book become that subsequent studies on Book of Mormon geography have widely (though by no means universally) accepted Sorenson's thesis and argue for settings for the Book of Mormon that are within fifty to one hundred miles of the location proposed by Sorenson. *Journey of Faith*, edited by S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson, could well be subtitled *An Ancient Near Eastern Setting for the Book of Mormon*. Brown and Johnson argue convincingly for an ancient Near Eastern background for Lehi's journey in the desert and also for their sojourn in Bountiful before setting sail for the land of promise.

1. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

Journey of Faith is a companion volume to the informative and deeply moving documentary movie of the same name, filmed on location in the cities and deserts of the Middle East. In this generously illustrated volume—and in poetic fashion—chapters dealing with the background story of the filming are interspersed with others that include the content of the documentary and quotations from an array of scholars and other specialists interviewed for that production.

The great American archaeologist and orientalist William F. Albright gives criteria for determining the historical plausibility of the Middle Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe*, which Albright considers to be “‘a substantially true account of life in its milieu’ on the grounds (1) that its ‘local color [is] extremely plausible,’ (2) it describes a ‘state of social organization’ which ‘agrees exactly with our present archaeological and documentary evidence,’ (3) ‘the Amorite personal names contained in the story are satisfactory for that period and region,’ and (4) ‘finally, there is nothing unreasonable in the story itself.’”² Hugh Nibley asks about the story of Lehi: “Does it correctly reflect ‘the cultural horizon and religious and social ideas and practices of the time’? Does it have authentic historical and geographical background? Is the *mise-en-scène* mythical, highly imaginative, or extravagantly improbable? Is its local color correct, and are its proper names convincing?”³ First Nephi in the Book of Mormon, as detailed in *Journey of Faith*—possessing plausible local color, plausible social organization, plausible proper names, and a plausible story line—fits Albright’s criteria as “a substantially true account of life in its milieu.” Some of what I draw for this discussion is from *Journey of Faith*, some from other sources.

Plausible Proper Names

I begin this discussion of the historical plausibility of the book of 1 Nephi with a rather extensive consideration of its use of proper

2. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 3.

3. William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1942), 64, cited in Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 4.

names, all of which, I hope to demonstrate, are plausible for the ancient Near East in the mid–first millennium BC.

Nephi (1 Nephi 1:1). A Phoenician inscription discovered at Elephantine contains the personal name *KNPY*. Frank L. Benz, in his important study on Phoenician and Punic personal names, sees the name *KNPY* as the Phoenician form of *K3-nfr.w*, a genuine Egyptian personal name.⁴ (In the period of the late Egyptian language, dating after 1,000 BC, the final *r* of *nfr*—pronounced “Nefer” or “Noufer”—came to be pronounced as an *i* or *y*, thus “Nefi.”) The name element *NPY* seems to be the Semitic transcription of either the Egyptian *nfr*, a common element of Egyptian personal names, or the Egyptian *Nfw*, meaning “captain.”⁵ The middle *p* in Phoenician or Hebrew would have been pronounced as an *f* sound, so the vocalization of *NPY* as *Nephi* poses no problem. “One may confidently conclude,” observes John Gee, “whether from *Nfr* or *Nfw*, the name *Nephi* is an attested Egyptian name.”⁶

Lehi (1 Nephi 1:4). This proper noun derives from a root meaning “jawbone.” It is used as a place-name in the Bible, specifically in Judges 15:9, 14, 17, and 19. In verse 17 the name appears in the combination *Ramath-lehi*, meaning “Jawbone Heights” or “Heights of Lehi.”⁷

4. Frank L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions: A Catalog, Grammatical Study and Glossary of Elements* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1972), 192. See Hermann Ranke, *Die ägyptischen Personennamen* (Glückstadt, Germany: Augustin, 1935–77), 1:340.

5. John Gee, “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name *Nephi*,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 1.

6. Gee, “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name *Nephi*,” 3.

7. There has been considerable discussion about the meaning of *Lehi* as a proper name in ancient Israel and in the Book of Mormon. Paul Hoskisson is cautious about accepting the name *Lehi* as the equivalent of the Hebrew term *leḥī* since, he believes, “personal names containing parts of the body are rare in all the ancient Semitic languages.” He derives *Lehi* from the Hebrew *l-ḥy*, “(belonging) to/for the living one.” Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Lehi and Sariah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 31. However, John A. Tvedtnes responds that “names beginning with prepositions (the *l-* in this case) are even more rare.” Further, Tvedtnes lists several “personal names deriving from body parts”: *Shechem* (“back, shoulder”), occurring as a personal name fifty-four times in scripture; *Rosh* (“head”), occurring once in Genesis 46:21; *Bohan* (“thumb”), occurring twice in Joshua 15:6 and 18:17; and *Seir* (“hair”), occurring twice in Genesis

Personal names occasionally appear as elements in place-names in the Old Testament. For example, *Rameses* or *Raamses* (from the Egyptian *pr-r^c-ms-sw*, “domain of Rameses”) was the name of the royal residence of the Ramesside kings in the Egyptian delta.⁸

Sariah (1 Nephi 2:5). According to Jeffrey Chadwick, the personal name *Sariah* is mentioned in the Aramaic papyri of Elephantine and appears in Papyrus #22 (also called Cowley #22 or C-22) in Arthur E. Cowley’s *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*⁹ Although the language of the documents is Aramaic, Cowley observes that the names are in fact Hebrew. Line 4 of C-22 lists the personal name as *šry[h br]t hws^c br hrmn*, which may be vocalized as *Sariah barat Hoshea bar Harman* and translated as “Sariah daughter of Hoshea son of Harman.” Cowley was obliged to reconstruct part of the text, supplying the final *h* of *Sariah* and the initial *b-r* of *barat*, but the spacing of the letters is reasonable, and the reconstructed text established by Cowley is in all probability accurate. “The extant final *t* of *barat* assures us,” observes Chadwick, “that the person was a daughter, not a son, and, after the letters *b-r* are supplied, there is only room for one additional letter—the final *h* of *Sariah*.” Further, although *Seraiah* (or *Sariah*) is not attested as a woman’s name in the Old Testament, it is mentioned therein nineteen times (in reference to nine persons) as a man’s name. Still, its attestation with a high degree of likelihood in the Elephantine Papyri as a Hebrew woman’s name, along with the

36:20–21. John A. Tvedtnes, “Lehi and Sariah Comments,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 37. See further Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Names *Lehi* and *Sariah*—Language and Meaning,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 32–34; and Dana M. Pike, “Response to Paul Hoskisson’s ‘Lehi and Sariah,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 35–36. Paul Hoskisson, in a personal communication, notes that while *Shechem* is used numerous times in scripture, only three people are involved, and it is not clear that they are not named after the city, which predates them. *Rosh* is also questionable as a personal name according to Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. “Rosh III.” *Bohan* is also, like *Shechem*, a place-name in territory belonging to non-Israelites.

8. Ronald W. Pierce, “Rameses,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:39.

9. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 196–98.

interchangeability of men's and women's names in ancient Israel¹⁰ and elsewhere,¹¹ make it probable that *śryh* was an interchangeable man's and woman's name in Israelite tradition of the first millennium BC.

Laman (1 Nephi 2:5). *LMN* was a proper name mentioned in a Lihyanite inscription.¹² Lihyanite was a language spoken (and written) in the ancient northwest Arabian Peninsula in the mid-first millennium BC. It is quite possible that Lehi chose this name and the name *Lemuel* as a result of his contact with Arabian names during his travels along the incense route.

Lemuel (1 Nephi 2:5). *Lemuel, King of Massa* is a man's name mentioned in Proverbs 31:1. *Massa* was the name of the seventh son of Ishmael, apparently the eponymous head of an Arabian tribe mentioned in Genesis 25:14. An inscription of Tiglath-Pileser III, dating from 745 to 722 BC, mentions that tribes from the region of northern Arabia, including "the inhabitants of *Mas'a*, of Tema" brought him tribute.¹³ A text from the sixth century BC mentions the presence of the Massa' tribe in the area between al-Jauf and Tayma' (Tema) in northern Arabia.¹⁴ The tribe of Massa may also be connected with the *Masanoi* of the Arabian desert, mentioned by Ptolemy in his *Geography*.¹⁵

Sam (1 Nephi 2:5). The proper name *Sam* may have an Israelite origin. Research indicates that it is "attested on a bronze ring-mounted

10. For example, *Abijah* is an Israelite man's name (*Abiah* in 1 Chronicles 6:28 and 7:8, *Abijah* in 2 Chronicles 11:20 and 13:2) as well as a woman's name—the name of Hezekiah's mother (2 Chronicles 29:1). In the latter case, the name is given as *Abi* in 2 Kings 18:2, which is "no doubt a contraction of *Abijah*." Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:5.

11. Consider, for example, the interchangeable names *Dana*, *Jordan*, *Kim*, *Leslie*, *Madison*, *Morgan*, *Robin*, *Shirley*, *Stac(e)y*, and *Tracy* in the Anglo-American tradition of naming.

12. G. Lankester Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 520.

13. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 283.

14. Frederick V. Winnett, *Ancient Records from North Arabia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 90–91, 101–2.

15. Ptolemy, *Geography* 5.18.2.

seal dated to the seventh century BC.”¹⁶ This word could be pronounced as “Shem” or with a lateralized *s* (originally pronounced like the Welsh *ll* but later pronounced as *s*).¹⁷ However, there were certain dialect variations in the pronunciation of this sound. For example, the Ephraimites—a tribe of Joseph and closely related to the family of Lehi and Ishmael—were unable to pronounce the word *shibboleth* properly, saying *sibboleth* instead (see Judges 12:4–6).

Laban (1 Nephi 3:3). Laban, the erstwhile custodian of the brass plates, had a very self-respecting Aramaic/Hebrew personal name mentioned first of all in the book of Genesis (24:29).

Ishmael (1 Nephi 7:2). The Hebrew name *Ishmael* means “God will hear” (see Genesis 16:11). In 1 Nephi we learn that he and his five daughters and at least two sons accompany Lehi (perhaps connected to them by marriage) into the wilderness and thence to the promised land. According to Erastus Snow, Ishmael was a descendant of Ephraim (while Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh).¹⁸ He was buried at Nahom.

Shazer (1 Nephi 16:13–14). Nibley notes that the term *shajer* is common in Palestinian place-names and that it means “trees,” with the variants *Sajur*, *Shaghur*, and *Segor* all said to represent a collection of trees. Nibley also mentions “a famous water hole in South Arabia, called *Shisur* by [Bertram] Thomas and *Shisar* by Philby.”¹⁹ A ruined city called *Shisur* and a permanent spring exist ninety miles northwest of Salalah in Oman on the frankincense route.²⁰

Nahom (1 Nephi 16:34). Nahom was the place where Ishmael was buried. Strikingly, *Nahom* is also a place-name in the Arabian

16. John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 51.

17. On the lateralized *s* in the Semitic languages in general, see Richard C. Steiner, *The Case for Fricative-Laterals in Proto-Semitic* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1977).

18. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:184.

19. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 78–79, citing Bertram Thomas, *Arabia Felix: Across the “Empty Quarter” of Arabia* (New York: Scribner, 1932), 136–37; and Harry S. J. B. Philby, *The Empty Quarter* (New York: Holt, 1933), 231.

20. Juris Zarins, “Atlantis of the Sands,” *Archaeology* 50/3 (1997): 52.

Peninsula. Carsten Niebuhr, an eighteenth-century German surveyor, geographer, and writer who journeyed through the Arabian Peninsula in the latter half of the eighteenth century,²¹ produced a map giving the name *Nehhm* to a location in Yemen north of Sana‘a, the present-day capital.²² This place was also anciently the traditional site of graves, hence the appropriateness of Ishmael’s burial there. In Hebrew *nāham* means “to groan”; in the South Arabian dialects *nahama* means “to dress stone.”²³

Irreantum (1 Nephi 17:5). Paul Hoskisson, in a brief article on the etymology of the name *Irreantum*, notes that the reason why 3 percent of the names given in the Book of Mormon are included with their meanings is that the Nephites, whose native spoken language was Hebrew and whose written language (or script) was Egyptian, would have been unable to understand the meaning of these words. “The only rational reason,” observes Hoskisson, “for Nephi to include both the transliteration and translation is that he did not expect his audience to immediately grasp the meaning of *Irreantum*, because it was not a readily recognizable Nephite word.”²⁴ The word is quite likely South Arabian or South Semitic in origin. The root *RWY has a basic meaning connected with watering and is related to another word, *‘rwy* (pronounced either “*arway*” or “*irway*”). The Semitic suffix element *-an* indicates a place suffix.²⁵ Finally, the Semitic root

21. For details of the Danish expedition to the Arabian Peninsula (Niebuhr accompanied this group), see Thorkild Hansen, *Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition of 1761–1767*, trans. James and Kathleen McFarlane (London: Collins, 1964).

22. S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place That Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 67.

23. Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 625, citing Proverbs 5:11 and Ezekiel 24:23 for “the groan of a sufferer”; Stephen D. Ricks, *Lexicon of Inscriptional Qatabanian* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989), 103; compare Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic, Sabaean Dialect* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

24. Paul Y. Hoskisson (with the assistance of Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee), “Irreanteum,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11 (2002): 90–93.

25. With this compare the extensive number of place-names ending in *-ōn* in ancient Hebrew given in Wilhelm Borée, *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas*, 2nd ed. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 57–62; see also Anson F. Rainey, “Toponymics of Eretz-Israel,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 231 (1978): 4–5, wherein Rainey calls *-ōn* an “appellative” suffix that describes “some feature or aspect of the site.”

*TM, meaning “whole, complete, abundant; abundance; entirety,” is appended to the end of the word. The resultant form, which may be read *Irwayantum/Arwayantum*, has the meaning “place of abundant water, many waters.”

Jacob (1 Nephi 18:7) and **Joseph** (1 Nephi 18:7). The personal names *Jacob* and *Joseph*, given to two of Lehi’s sons who were born during the wilderness sojourn, are venerable Hebrew names of patriarchal figures.

Lehi’s sons thus bear names from three possibly distinct traditions: three (*Sam*, *Jacob*, and *Joseph*) may be of Israelite origin, two (*Laman* and *Lemuel*) may be of Arabian provenance, and one (*Nephi*) may be of Egyptian background, suggesting the strong possibility of Lehi’s acquaintance with these names as an experienced and knowledgeable traveling merchant, and also indicating the direction of his travels—along the incense route (which may have given rise to the names *Laman* and *Lemuel*) and to and from Egypt.²⁶

Plausible Story Line and Local Color

The book of 1 Nephi is a sober account of life and circumstances in sixth-century-BC Jerusalem and in the desert, and all of the details dealt with in the book—metallurgy and toolmaking,²⁷ Nephi’s metal bow,²⁸ gold plates, ships and shipbuilding, incense culture and the incense trade,²⁹ and the voyage to the promised land—are a far cry

26. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 34–35.

27. John L. Sorenson, in “Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), provides an extensive bibliography of sources on metallurgy in the Old World.

28. See Alan Goff and John W. Welch, “Nephi’s Bows and Arrows,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 41–43; William J. Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 365–99; and Nahum Waldman, Alan Goff, and John W. Welch, “The Breaking of the Bow” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1983).

29. John L. Sorenson, “Incense-Burning and ‘Seer’ Stones in Ancient Mesoamerica: New Evidence of Migrations of Biblical Peoples to the New World” and “New Evidence of Migration of Biblical People to the New World,” *University Archaeological Society Newsletter* 21 (July 1954).

from the fantastic, if also perennially entertaining, tales from the *Arabian Nights*. The opening scene of the Book of Mormon is set in an era of uncertainty and confusion, with one side supporting the Egyptian cause, the other (including Jeremiah) arguing for submission to the Babylonians. Lehi takes a universally unpopular stance: Jerusalem would be destroyed.

Plausible Social Organization

“The Book of Mormon,” observes John Welch in *Journey of Faith*, “begins with a family, but more precisely with a couple, Lehi and Sariah” (p. 55). This story of a family in the wilderness—with a family dynamic of tension between the stoic and the whiners, the convinced and the uncommitted, sharpened and exacerbated by bitter toils in the desert—rings true. The uncommitted brothers, Laman and Lemuel, griped when asked by their father to retrieve the plates from Jerusalem, returned to the city willingly, if not enthusiastically, when asked to go there to obtain wives.

With its plausible story line, local color, social organization, and proper names, the book of 1 Nephi tells the story of a group of messianic Israelites who left Jerusalem around 600 BC and went into the desert to escape the corruption, decadence, and destruction of Jerusalem. While one cannot prove the correctness of the account through empirical means, its plausibility can but enhance its claims of authenticity. *Journey of Faith* does triple duty: it tells about the filming of the documentary, it is a sourcebook of quotations from the documentary, and it also relates in sober, straightforward, and plausible fashion the story of the journey of Lehi and Sariah’s family from Jerusalem to Bountiful and thence to the promised land.