

Lehi's Trail and Nahom Revisited

Warren P. Aston,
Michaela J. Aston

1 Nephi 16:34 "Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom."

Going well beyond what one could safely say about the Arabian peninsula in 1829, Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon included several details about Lehi's route through the desert. The text mentions a place "which was called Nahom," and it makes the astonishing claim that somewhere along the southern coast of Arabia, one can find a fruitful and bounteous haven with trees, garden spots, and honey. Such claims can now be checked better than ever before.

In 1976, Lynn M. and Hope Hilton traveled through Arabia and published an illustrated report in which they proposed that the place called Nahom, where Ishmael died and was buried, was around Al Kunfidah near the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia.¹ Ross T. Christensen soon suggested an alternative location for Nahom, based upon a map of Yemen prepared as a result of a 1762-64 exploration by Carsten Niebuhr for Danish King Frederick V.² To investigate these competing claims, Warren P. and Michaela J. Aston of Australia visited Yemen in November 1984, searching for additional evidence concerning Nahom and the route taken by Lehi and his party.

The Astons located a 1976 map at the University of Sana'a in the Yemen Arab Republic that showed "Nehem" located some thirty-five miles northeast of Sana'a (further south than the site proposed by the Hiltons). This appeared to be the same region Niebuhr listed as "Nehm." Moreover, the Nahm or Naham tribe has existed in the area since at least the tenth century A.D. If further work supports their tentative findings associating "Nehem" with the Book of Mormon "Nahom," several details of Lehi's route will need to be reassessed. In particular, the identification of the land Bountiful on the southern coast of the Arabian peninsula, from which the group set sail for the New World, probably needs to be moved westward from Salalah, the site proposed by the Hiltons (which also happens to keep it in the proper relationship "nearly eastward" [1 Nephi 17:1] with Nahom).

There are two Semitic language roots suggested by the Book of Mormon Nahom: *nhm* and *nh̄m*. Either or both may stand behind the name Nahom in 1 Nephi 16. In 1950, Hugh Nibley noted that the name Nahom must come from a Semitic language root signifying lamenting and grieving (in Arabic as *naḥama*, "sigh, groan, moan, especially with another").³ In Hebrew, the root *nh̄m* is often used for "mourning" someone else's death or "consoling" the bereaved (Genesis 37:35; 38:12; 50:21; 2 Samuel 10:2-3; Isaiah 22:4; 51:19; Jeremiah 16:7).⁴ Since the Astons found that a large zone of ancient tombs extends over many miles within the region of Nehem in Yemen, this could indicate the longtime use of this area as a burial ground, possibly making a name signifying "grieving" highly appropriate, if only as a play on similar roots.

The name of the area in Yemen now mapped as "Nehem" is pronounced by local inhabitants Nā-hum, derived from the Arabic root *nhm*, whose basic meaning is "growl, groan, roar; suffer from hunger; complain." The same root is found in biblical Hebrew (see Isaiah 5:29-30; Hosea 2:23) and in ancient Egyptian (*nhm*, "thunder, shout"; *nhmhm*, "roar, thunder"). Thus a ritual concomitant of mourning (groaning) is also associated with this root, as well as the

sense of suffering from hunger, which is equally apt in the context of 1 Nephi 16:35, which reports much complaining, suffering, and hunger.

The Astons further found that current scholars plot out a more complicated trail system for the frankincense trade than was thought a decade ago. Those trails came farther south along the Red Sea coast before branching off eastward than the Hiltons' sources showed. And instead of there being only a single area, Dhofar (Zufar), producing frankincense, it now appears that an area some five hundred miles long along the south coast of the Arabian peninsula produced this precious substance.⁵ It was shipped from the eastern areas (including the Salalah area favored by the Hiltons for Bountiful) in coastal vessels to Qana, thence northward along the trail toward the consuming centers in the Near East. These facts make it less likely than had appeared that Lehi's party would have reached the sea as far east as Salalah.

Instead, Lehi's group may have ended its desert journey between Salalah and the coastal Hadramawt area of modern South Yemen. In that region, William Hamblin has found pre-Islamic traditions about a prophet named Hud, whose tomb is located near the border between Oman and South Yemen.⁶ Like Lehi, Hud reputedly prophesied against certain idol worshippers who were "renowned for their elaborate buildings" (compare 1 Nephi 8:26), was rejected because of the pride of the people (compare 1 Nephi 8:27), but escaped while the wicked were destroyed.⁷ While probably not closely connected, Lehi and Hud seem to have been kindred spirits.

For centuries, the sands have blown across Lehi's trail. Perhaps additional clues yet remain about where Lehi's group might have traveled.

After the time of this Update in September 1986, which was based on research by Warren P. and Michaela J. Aston, Stephen D. Ricks, and John W. Welch, the Astons made other trips to south Arabia, traveling also into Oman. The most recent versions of their regularly updated and enhanced reports, "The Search for Nahom and the End of Lehi's Trail," "The Place Which Was Called Nahom," and "And We Called the Place Bountiful—The End of Lehi's Arabian Journey," can be ordered from F.A.R.M.S. In particular, the Astons' examination of the central stretch of the south coast of the Arabian peninsula has produced exciting new results. A previously unexplored fertile valley called Wadi Sayq, tucked away on the south Arabian coast, seems the most likely candidate for the place of Lehi's Bountiful.

Footnotes

1. Lynn M. and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 94; also published in *Ensign* 6 (September 1976): 33-54 and (October 1976): 34-63.

2. Ross T. Christensen, "Comment: The Place Called Nahom," *Ensign* 8 (August 1978): 73.

3. Hugh Nibley, "Lehi in the Desert," *Improvement Era* 53 (June 1950): 517. See *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 90-91; in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 5:79.

4. See H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of NḤM," *Biblica* 56 (1975): 512-32, who compares Ugaritic *nḥm* "console."

5. Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman Group, 1981). See also Thomas J. Abercrombie, "Arabia's Frankincense Trail," *National Geographic* 168 (October 1985): 474-512.

6. William Hamblin, "Pre-Islamic Arabian Prophets," in Spencer Palmer, ed., *Mormons and Muslims* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1983), 87-89.

7. See Qur'an 7:65-72; 11:50-60; 26:123-40.