The Brightening Light on the Journey of Lehi and Sariah

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Many Book of Mormon scholars have attempted to determine the course that Lehi and his family took when they fled Jerusalem to travel to the promised land. In his record, Nephi provided place-names and geographical descriptions, but that information is not sufficient to make conclusive claims. This article draws on the experiences and research of others to discuss the possible locations of the Valley of Lemuel, Shazer, the area where Nephi’s bow broke, Nahom, and Bountiful.
Over the last century several Latter-day Saint scholars have examined the geographical details in 1 Nephi in order to correlate them with specific sites in the Middle East. Propositions have varied, though not greatly since Nephi provided some fairly explicit pointers, aided by a number of other clues. Hugh Nibley opened the investigation in 1950 with a series of articles titled “Lehi in the Desert,” initially published in the Improvement Era.¹ In 1976 Lynn and Hope Hilton traveled across the Arabian Peninsula in an effort to determine the route of Lehi and Sariah’s journey. Their conclusions were published in a two-part series, “In Search of Lehi’s Trail,” in the September and October 1976 issues of the Ensign magazine,² and a book on their journey appeared that same year.³ Warren and Michaela Aston took several trips to the region in the early 1990s, resulting in two FARMS preliminary reports and a book in 1994, In the Footsteps of Lehi.⁴ Warren Aston published an article on his candidate for Bountiful in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies in 1998.⁵ George Potter described his proposed site for the Valley of Lemuel in a 1999 JBMS article,⁶ and he and Richard Wellington published Lehi in the Wilderness in 2003.⁷

Other researchers through the years have contributed additional suggestions about sites along Lehi’s trail. There seems to be general agreement among these investigators that Lehi’s party, for most of the journey, traveled on or near the Frankincense Trail, which was a pathway for carrying goods from southern Arabia to the Mediterranean region.
The Valley of Lemuel

Nephi tells us that after his family left Jerusalem, they traveled “by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea” for three days and pitched their tents in a location that Lehi called the “valley of Lemuel” (1 Nephi 2:5, 14). Guided by Nephi’s comment that the river Laman “emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea” (v. 9) and “near the mouth thereof” (v. 8), Nibley guessed that the first camp was at “the Gulf of Aqaba at a point not far above the Straits of Tiran.” Lehi may have been standing on “the sides of Mt. Musafa or Mt. Mendisha” when he beheld the river flowing into the Red Sea. The Hiltons concluded that the Valley of Lemuel was an oasis, “Al Beda [or al-Badʿ] in the Wadi El Afal [or al-Ifal], Saudi Arabia.” This would be approximately 75 miles south and east of Aqaba. There are springs in this valley, but streams run seasonally after torrential rains. Potter proposed that the Valley of Lemuel was south of Aqaba at Wadi Tayyib al-Ism (“Valley of the Good Name”), between Bir Marsha and al-Badʿ, near the “Waters of Moses.” It empties into the Gulf of Aqaba on its east shore and is almost 75 miles south of Aqaba. There is a stream there that flows all year long.

Shazer

The location of Shazer is not definite. According to the account, after Lehi had spent a period of time in the Valley of Lemuel, the group traveled four days in a south-southeast direction along the Red Sea. Assuming that their movement covered about 100 miles, the Hiltons concluded that they stopped at “the oasis of Azlan in the Wadi Azlan.” Potter and Wellington believe that Lehi traveled 18 miles from the Valley of Lemuel to al-Badʿ, where he would have had to pay tribute to pass. They suggest that Shazer was 60 miles south-southeast at Wadi Agharr, where there is a delightful oasis—“a valley with trees.” The group stayed there long enough to slay animals, and then they carried on their journey.

Where Nephi’s Bow Broke

This locale presents a challenge for the researcher. As the Hiltons traveled along the coast of the Red Sea, they judged that Nephi broke his bow somewhere in the vicinity of Jiddah, in Saudi Arabia. They noted that there “the weather is a merciless combination of heat, humidity, sand, and salt—a force strong enough to destroy steel.” They saw car

BYU archaeologist Ross Christensen, in a letter to the Ensign, referred to a 1763 map by Carsten Niebuhr that featured the place “Nehhm,” located in Yemen 100 miles east of Luhaiya and about 25 miles north of Sana'a.

Warren and Michaela Aston confirm that there was an ancient burial ground in Yemen called Nehem, a location matching Nephi’s directions.

Yemeni archaeologist Abdu Ghaileb discovers a large burial ground in Wadi Nihm belonging to Nihm tribe.
fenders that had rusted out within a few months. Potter and Wellington sought for a location near Bisha that was on the east side of the al-Sarāt mountains and that had trees with the kind of wood that would have been particularly suitable for Nephi to make a durable bow. Through contact with local experts and written research, they learned that the olive tree exactly fits the requirements. They concluded that the high wadis between al-Qadim and Jabal Azzah northwest of Bisha present the general area where Nephi constructed his bow.14

**Nahom**

In 1976 the Hiltons estimated that Nahom was on the 19th parallel, which passes near Najran, and can be identified with al-Qunfudhah in Saudi Arabia. Two years later, Brigham Young University archaeologist Ross Christensen, in a letter to the *Ensign*, stated that he understood that Nahom can mean “mourning” as well as “comfort” or “consolation” and that these words might have been connected to a burial ground.15 He noted that Nephi implied that Nahom was an established place-name, not one that Lehi himself had chosen, that the place was likely peopled, and that there might be some linguistic remnant of the name that has survived to our day. He referred to a map made by Carsten Niebuhr in 1763 that featured the place “Nehhm,” located 100 miles east of Luhaiya and about 25 miles north of Sana’a (the name on the map is south of the line the Hiltons drew for their suggested route to Bountiful). In 1991 the Astons confirmed that there was a burial ground in a place called Nehem, which was located just about where one would expect to find it from Nephi’s directions.16 In 1994 the Astons proposed that the site is near a large valley, Wadi Jawf, in Yemen.17 In the 2005 FARMS documentary *Journey of Faith*, Yemeni archaeologist Abdu Ghaleb reports his discovery in 1994 of a large burial ground in Wadi Nihm that belongs to the Nihm tribe.

The decisive connection to a tribal area in Yemen by the name of Nahom came to light in 1999 when S. Kent Brown published a short article in *JBMS* detailing the discovery of an inscribed altar bearing the tribal name NHM, or Nihm/Nahom.18 The excavators, a German archaeological team working at the Barāʾan temple in Marib (in Yemen), date the altar to the 7th–6th centuries BC, the very time that Lehi and
Sariah were journeying. In 2001 Aston reported on two more 7th–6th century altars from the same site that preserve the tribal name NHM, further cementing this name as a designation contemporary with Lehi and Sariah. It is now clear that the tribal area of Nahom lay on the south edge of Wadi Jawf, the largest drainage in this part of Arabia.19

**Bountiful**

A botanically rich swath of coastal area spans the southern coast of Oman and stretches a short distance into Yemen. Along this coastline several sites are candidates (some stronger than others) for the land of Bountiful where Lehi’s family stopped to camp and to construct a ship. In 1950 Nibley designated the maritime plain south of the Qara mountain range in general as the shore where Lehi’s party camped. The Hiltons in 1976 narrowed the site to “a tiny sickle of land curved around a little bay, about 28 miles long and only 7 miles wide, backed by the Qara Mountains.”20 That location is now called Salalah. Eugene England agreed with this conclusion in an article titled “Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?”21 The Astons challenged this conclusion in 1994, convinced that the site of Lehi’s camp was Wadi Sayq on the Qamar coast of Oman. The coastal mouth of the valley is Khor Khafarot. It lies almost exactly eastward of Nahom in Yemen and west of Salalah.22 Warren Aston provided further arguments for this view in 1998. Looking in a different place, Potter and Wellington in 2003 designated an area east of Salalah, the deep bay of Khor Rori, as the place where Nephi likely built and launched his ship.23 In February 2000 a team of BYU geologists located two surface deposits of iron ore on the coast of Dhofar from which Nephi could have obtained ore for making tools to build his ship. One was a few kilometers east of Wadi Sayq, the other 10 kilometers east of Khor Rori, close to Mirbat. Wm. Revell Phillips reported these discoveries in a *JBMS* article in 2000.24

In summary, what impresses a student of the Book of Mormon is the presence of iron ore, a rich variety of vegetation, and large number of inlet bays (about 12)—all concentrated along the southern coast of Oman, making the area a good fit for Nephi’s description of the place where he built his ship.
Bibliography of Lehi’s Journey


Ogden, D. Kelly “Answering the Lord’s Call (1 Nephi 1–7).” In Jackson, *Studies in Scripture*, 17–33.


and Arugot valleys is shown in the influential Carta Bible Atlas (formerly The Macmillan Bible Atlas) as the path taken by Flavius Silva's Tenth Roman Legion to travel from Jerusalem past Ein Gedi to Masada. See Yohanan Aharoni et al., The Carta Bible Atlas, 4th ed. (Jerusalem: Carta, 2002), 190 (map 260).

11. In the winter of 1994, when I was a full-time instructor at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, I explored the segment of this route from Jerusalem to Ein Gedi with my wife and children. I also served as Scoutmaster of Jerusalem Troop 75 at the time and took my Scouts along the Arugot valley segment of that desert trail (located in Israel's Ein Gedi National Park).

12. Brown explains in an endnote that the Jerusalem/Ein Gedi/Arabah route is the one preferred by D. Kelly Ogden in "Answering the Lord's Call (1 Nephi 1–7)," in Studies in Scripture, Volume Seven: 1 Nephi to Alma 29, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 23n8. I think it is important to mention, even if only in an endnote, that Ogden walked the entire distance from Jerusalem to the Red Sea via the Arabah valley in order to explore Lehi's trail firsthand. The walk was accomplished over several terms during 1986 and 1987 while Ogden was an instructor for Brigham Young University's Jerusalem Center student programs. As a fellow instructor there, I joined him on some portions of his "Lehi Trek," including the summer 1986 portion where it became evident to us both that Lehi could not have taken a trail from Qumran to Ein Gedi along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea since steep cliffs meet the lake's edge there. This led us both to the conclusion, on strictly practical grounds, that Lehi must have come from Jerusalem to Ein Gedi via the Arugot valley approach and that he traveled along the Dead Sea's west shore only south of Ein Gedi, where that shoreline flattens out and makes foot traffic possible.


16. The article may be accessed online at maxwell institute.byu.edu/publications/review-main.php by clicking on the link for FARMS Review 17/2, 2005.


18. My negative conclusions about Tayyib al-Islam were not well received in some quarters, as noted by the FARMS Review editor (see the editor's introduction by Daniel C. Peterson, "Not So Easily Dismissed: Some Facts for Which Counterexplanations of the Book of Mormon Will Need to Account," FARMS Review 17/2 [2005]: xxvii–xxix). I fully understand this disappointment, and even the initial tendency toward denial, on the part of those who not only felt that a "valley of Lemuel" had been discovered but also had invested significant resources in presenting the site to the public in books and video programs. And to be fair, I should point out that Brown and Wellington and Potter had not yet seen my review when they began preparing their original drafts for the articles in this present issue of JBMS. It may be that they or others who have a vested interest in Tayyib al-Islam will eventually prepare and publish a full response to the issues I raised in the FARMS Review.


20. This is essentially a restatement of the model presented in Chadwick, "The Wrong Place for Lehi's Trail and the Valley of Lemuel," 211.

21. The apparatus for capitalized abbreviations in the footnotes is found at the beginning of each Book of Mormon, triple combination, and Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible. However, the apparatus for the Book of Mormon and the triple combination omits the capitalized abbreviations HEB (Hebrew) and GR (Greek) that are included in the Bible. The page titled "Explanation Concerning Abbreviations" at the front of the Latter-day Saint edition of the KJV indicates that a HEB footnote provides "an alternate translation from the Hebrew." The use of HEB in footnote a of 1 Nephi 16:13 is thus supposed to indicate that an "alternate translation" of Shazer is "twisting, intertwining." The problems, of course, are that we do not have a translation of the name to begin with and that we cannot know if the proposed alternate translation is legitimate.

22. In addition to 1 Nephi 16:13, HEB occurs in a footnote to each of the following verses: 1 Nephi 16:34 (concerning Nahom, but at least qualified by probably); 2 Nephi 9:20; Mosiah 11:3; and Mosiah 27:29.


26. See Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 142–43. Not only do the authors suggest that Arab sailors accompanied Lehi's colony on the voyage to America, they propose that Lehi took along household servants as well, who remain unmentioned in Nephite's text because they possessed no rights as family members. But no textual evidence for this suggestion is offered.

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1. See the bibliography of Lehi's journey that follows this article.


17. See Aston and Aston, In the Footsteps of Lehi, 22.


22. See Aston and Aston, In the Footsteps of Lehi, 37–43.

23. See Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 152–53.


Birds Along Lehi’s Trail
Stephen L. Carr

1. The trip leaders for this tour were Gregory Witt of Brigham Young University; Lynn M. Hilton, author of two books pertaining to Lehi’s journey, In Search of Lehi’s Trail and Discovering Lehi; and Warren P. Aston, author of the book In the Footsteps of Lehi.


3. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, in “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seeley, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 81–130, presents evidence that Lehi’s house was located inside the city of Jerusalem and that his land of inheritance lay at some distance outside the city.