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

Stephen D. Ricks

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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.
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 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. 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. 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, 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, and others 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. The identification of the ancient name *nhm* 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 *nhm* 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. *Nhm* 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-Iklīl* and in his *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-ʿArab*. If, as Robert Wilson observes, there is minimal movement among the tribes over time, sources for Nehem, *nhm* and *nḫm*. Therefore, Nahom as the realization of the southwest Arabian proper name *nhm* is eminently plausible. In the ancient Sabean and Qatabanian dialects of southern Arabia, *nhm* is again the only root of the three possibilities that appears, with meanings of “pecked masonry” or “stone dressing.”

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 *nahama*, “to sigh or moan”; and the Hebrew root *nḥm*, “to comfort or console”) both fit the context of this passage. But these etymologies are not reflected in the geographic name Nehem because both contain the dotted *ḥ*, not the simple *ḥ*. Still, it is possible that the name Nahom served as the basis of a play on words by Lehi’s party that Nephi recorded. Likewise, the Hebrew root *nḥm*, meaning “to mourn” (but “to roar” in Isaiah 5:29–30), attest 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.

**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 *nhm* with the Book of Mormon Nahom on linguistic grounds is the consonant *ḥ*. The Semitic languages have three different consonants represented in English by *ḥ*, each with its own unique Semitic pronunciation. With diacritical marks, the three sounds are represented as *ḥ*, a voiceless laryngeal (to linguists) or simple *ḥ* (to Semitists) (pronounced as the *ḥ* in *hat*); *ḥ*, a voiceless pharyngeal or dot-*ḥ* (pronounced as the *ḥ* in *hue*); and *ḥ*, a voiceless guttural fricative or hook-*ḥ* (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.”

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

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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.
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(y)n to the seventh to sixth centuries B.C. 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.
10. Al-Hamdānī, Ṣifat Jazīrât al-ʿArab, 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. qabila); Jawad ‘Ali, Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Taʾrīkh al-ʿArab 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. fi ayyām al-mukarrībīna wa-fī ayyām mulāk Sāba’); he also gives Nhm as a place-name, Al- Mufaṣṣal, 4:187 and 7:462.
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 infor-