
THE BOOK OF MORMON: DISCOVERIES AND EVIDENCES

Tuesday: Lehi's Journey through Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Although most of the Book of Mormon takes place in the New World, more than **forty-one pages** of First Nephi are firmly planted in an **Old World setting**, particularly Arabia. When Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, there were no accounts available to him of any westerners visiting Arabia. Thus he had no descriptions of that area of the world that might have served as references for the first part of the story. Yet he published a thorough account filled with geographical and other details, **ready to be tested** against reality.

Linking those pages to their actual locations began in earnest in **1950** when **Hugh Nibley** first presented a Near Eastern setting for these first stories.¹ He humbly called his work "little more than a general survey,"² yet he broke new ground in correlating ancient documents, scholarly opinion, writings about life in Arabia, and even ancient Arabic poetry with Lehi's story. Nibley provided a map of the potential route of Lehi's clan through Arabia based on his feeling that Bountiful had to be "in the forested sector of the Hadhramaut," from where he simply drew a line westward until it intersected the main caravan trail.³ His subsequent works continued to bring Lehi's story to life and show its unambiguous connection to life in ancient Israel and Arabia.⁴

Nibley's writing proved to be a catalyst for **subsequent scholars and explorers**,⁵ many published recently,⁶ who have ventured into the area, studied ancient texts, examined the archaeology, and proposed locations for the events Nephi records. The result is that we can now place the early pages of the Book of Mormon in a precise historical setting, and in at least one case can identify multiple plausible locations for a site recorded in the text.

¹ "Lehi in the Desert," *Improvement Era* 53 (Jan-Oct 1950), available today in Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert / The World of the Jaredites / There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1988).

² *Lehi in the Desert*, 4-6.

³ *ibid.*, 110 for the quote, 112 for the map. Nibley's map is remarkably similar to the most current ones suggested by the authors in this *Journal*.

⁴ Additional writings about the early chapters of the Book of Mormon were included in 1957's *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1988); 1967's *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1988); and a collection of four decades of other Book of Mormon writings in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1989).

⁵ For an insightful discussion of this point, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999), particularly 34-37. Also see Eugene England's study "Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?" in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, Noel B. Reynolds, Editor (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1982), 143-56.

⁶ Significant publications on this topic by these authors include: **Warren P. Aston & Michaela Knoth Aston**, *In the Footsteps of Lehi* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1994) and **George Potter and Richard Wellington**, *Lehi in the Wilderness* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, Inc., 2003). **S. Kent Brown's** many and significant publications are listed in his article, but I would call out "New Light From Arabia on Lehi's Trail" in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS/ISPART, 2002); the first two chapters of *Voices from the Dust* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, Inc., 2004) and the excellent DVD *Journey of Faith* (2005) with its accompanying book *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006).

This is quite a feat for a book that did not represent the popular understanding of Arabia when it was first published.⁷

This class summarizes the various findings in these sources to give a view of what we know today regarding Lehi's trail through Arabia, which journey is summarized in the table below. Note that the only firm year is the first one— 597 B.C. as the first year of the reign of Zedekiah; the rest are reasonable guesses based on the text.

Year	Location	Reference	Notes
597	Jerusalem	1 Ne 1:4	The first year of the reign of Zedekiah was in 597 B.C.
596	Jerusalem	1 Ne 2:4	We don't know how long Lehi preached after his initial vision, but once the Lord warned him to leave, he seems to have done so fairly quickly.
596	Jerusalem to Aqaba	1 Ne 2:5	The initial journey is in two stages: First, "And he came down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea [gulf of Aqaba]."
596	Aqaba to Valley of Lemuel	1 Ne 2:5-10	Second, "...when he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent" (v 6).
595	Valley of Lemuel to Shazer	1 Ne 16:9-13	We don't know how long they stayed in the Valley of Lemuel, but it was enough time for two trips back to Jerusalem, at least five weddings, visions, and provision gathering. They packed up and traveled four days south-southeast, stopping at Shazer.
595	Shazer to "Broken Bow Camp"	1 Ne 16:14-17	After hunting food at Shazer, the group traveled for "many days" (v 15) in the "more fertile parts of the wilderness" (v 16). They stopped again to "obtain food" (v 17). No record of them naming this spot is given, but it has been nicknamed "Broken Bow Camp" because of events there.
595	"Broken Bow Camp"	1 Ne 16:23, 32	After his steel bow goes bad, Nephi made a bow and arrow from wood and found food, saving the group.
595	"Broken Bow Camp" to Nahom	1 Ne 16:33-36	They traveled "many days" (v 33) in the same south-southeast direction, then pitched tents to "tarry for the space of a time" (v 33). Here Ishmael died and was buried at "Nahom" (v. 34).
595-588	Nahom to Bountiful	1 Ne 17:1-6	Now traveling "nearly eastward" (v 1), the party suffered much, eating raw meat. They "sojourn" (v 4) in the wilderness for eight years total before coming to a land they name Bountiful.
588-586	Departure from Bountiful	1 Ne 17:7-18:23	After being in Bountiful for "many days," the Lord told Nephi to build a ship, which they used to cross the ocean to the promised land.

JERUSALEM TO THE VALLEY OF LEMUEL

⁷ Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi's Arabian Journey Updated," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 388.

1 Nephi 1:4

The story opens in the days of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, the reformer king who cleansed the temple and sought to purge the land of idol worship. Josiah reigned 640-609 B.C. Upon his death in battle against the Egyptians, two of his sons and a grandson eventually reigned (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin). After the first successful siege against Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, yet another of Josiah's sons was placed on the throne—Zedekiah. We know the date of this event because of the Babylonian records and chronology, which include datable, astronomical events—it was **597 B.C.**⁸

1 Nephi 1:5-6, 18-20

It was in this time of uncertainty and trouble that Lehi prays on behalf of his people and has his vision and subsequent call to join the "many prophets" in crying repentance unto the Jews. But his words, as we sadly know, touched few of the hardened hearts of the day—including his own two eldest sons. Some were angry enough to want to kill him.

1 Nephi 2:4-5

We don't know how long Lehi preached, but it was at least long enough to arouse some hostile feelings among the Jews. It could have been a few weeks or a few years. Thus we don't know when Lehi packed up his family and left, but it's reasonable that it was about a year later because of the lull in the hostilities as Nebuchadnezzar had to return to Mesopotamia to deal with problems there. Regardless of the period of time, Lehi seems to have quickly gathered the needed supplies and obediently departed.

The fact that the text says "he departed into the wilderness" shows that he **probably went east** at first and not south. South would keep him in Judah and under the control of the government of Zedekiah. East gets the party out of that problem and also takes them right into the area known as "the wilderness" (for example, see Judges 11). Thus the most likely route out of Jerusalem was east over the north end of the Dead Sea into what is today Jordan. From there they could have taken either the King's Highway or, a little further to the east, the Way of the Wilderness, both common roads for caravans and travelers.

1 Nephi 2:6

The initial journey appears to have been in two separate stages. First, they travel "down by the borders near the Red Sea," meaning to somewhere near Ezion-geber (which means "the backbone of a warrior"; compare 1 Nephi 2:10, footnote a). Nephi isn't clear how long they stayed there, perhaps just a short time.

The second part was traveling in "the borders which are nearer the Red Sea." Some have taken this to mean a separate area than in the previous verse. But the **early texts** of the Book of Mormon used "**near**" for **both** verses. So what this seems to be saying is (paraphrasing): 'And he came down by the area near the Red Sea; and he traveled in the wilderness which was in the region near the Red Sea.'

The main trail turned inland here, so perhaps Lehi followed it. After going "three days in the wilderness," they pitched their tents in a valley near a "**river of water**" which Lehi named "**Laman**" (1 Nephi 2:8). The **valley** where they stayed he named "**Lemuel**" (1 Nephi 2:14). The river was "**continually running**" and "emptied into the Red Sea" (1 Nephi 2:8-9). The valley Lehi described as "**firm and steadfast, and immovable**" (1 Nephi 2:10). In this

⁸ See, for example, Grant, Michael, *The History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 102, and Kaiser, Walter, *A History of Israel* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 402.

valley they found **water** and food, including **grain, fruit**, and "all manner of **seeds**" (1 Nephi 8:1). Where is such a valley in the deserts of western Saudi Arabia?

In **May of 1995**, four LDS men living in Saudi Arabia, **George Potter, Richard Wellington, Tom Culler, and Craig Thorsted**, set out to find Mount Sinai. They drove to the Midian area, having heard there were some ruins there that related to Moses. Looking for the Waters of Moses, they stopped at the first place that looked "official"—a coast guard station. There the captain directed them to the Waters of Musa (Moses) twelve miles up the coast, north of Maqna. The group followed his directions and eventually came to a narrow valley in the cliffs that had palm trees growing near the beach. They hiked up the canyon and discovered that it was nearly four miles long, with tall, steep, granite cliffs, finally opening to a wide wadi (valley) at the top named **Tayyib al-Isim** that had several groves of **date palms**, wells, and even some wild **grains**. Most interesting was that there was a stream that flowed from the top of the canyon to the bottom. They realized that they had found a **stream** and a valley that matched Nephi's description.

Subsequent visits and explorations convinced them that there are no other valleys like this in that entire coastal area, and certainly **no other streams**. They went there at all times of the year and found the stream **always flowing**—literally unheard of anywhere else in Saudi Arabia. They discovered how to arrive at the wadi from the north, as Lehi and company would have done, and found that if they followed the coastal mountains until they were blocked from going any further south, then turned up the canyon at that spot, it led them directly to the wadi. They noted that it is **seventy-three miles from Ezion-geber to Tayyib al-Isim**, corresponding to the range of what a packed camel would travel in three days.⁹

Nephi's description of the river makes it sound larger than the stream in Tayyib al-Isim today.¹⁰ But the valley today shows signs of water erosion from previous years on the sides of the canyon walls and in foot deep channels. Locals explained and a geologist confirmed to Potter and Wellington that the stream used to be bigger, but since the government put wells and pumps at the top of the wadi, the stream has greatly diminished.¹¹

IN THE VALLEY OF LEMUEL

1 Nephi 2:16 – 16:8 (don't read)

Roughly **seventy-five percent** of the first forty-one pages of First Nephi took place while the family was camped **in the valley** they named *Lemuel*. There Nephi had his first encounter with the Lord, confirming the truthfulness of his father's prophecies and securing an assurance from the Lord of a future land of promise (2:16-24). The sons of Lehi twice left the valley and went back to Jerusalem, first for the plates of Laban (3:1-5:22) and second for the family of Ishmael (7:1-22). Lehi experienced his "Tree of Life" vision there (8:1-38), followed by Nephi's own related visionary experience (11:1-14:30). The families also celebrated five weddings (16:7).

How long the family remained in the Valley of Lemuel is unknown, and opinions vary widely. Perhaps they felt for a time that they were going to stay here. From the text, it appears that not until Nephi has his vision did they understand they were to cross the sea (see 1 Nephi 13:10-14, for example). The text gives some hints about the length of time.

⁹ See Lehi in the Wilderness, chapters 1-3.

¹⁰ Nephi makes a point, for example, that they crossed over the river (1 Nephi 16:12); if it was a small stream, that would hardly be worth mentioning.

¹¹ Potter (2003), 38.

The first **hint** is found in 1 Nephi 8:1, where the group “gathered together all manner of **seeds**,” including both grain and fruit, while in the valley. Nephi later stated that they brought seeds from “the land of Jerusalem” (18:24); this verse shows that at least some of their seed gathering happened here in the valley.¹² Gathering seeds probably indicates a stay of at least **one growing season**.¹³ These seeds are significant because the family resists using them until they arrive in the New World.

The second hint relates to the mention of **children only after** the family arrives at **Nahom** (17:1), the basis for at least one scholar’s argument for a short stay in the Valley. But as the group paused at Shazer to hunt (16:13-14), Nephi said that they did “go forth into the wilderness to slay food for *our families*; and after we had slain food for *our families* we did return again to *our families* in the wilderness (16:14, emphasis added). This took place well before the arrival at Nahom. If the group took less than a year to reach Nahom and only there saw the first births of children from the marriages contracted in the Valley of Lemuel, as some suggest, Nephi’s use of the plural term “our families” at Shazer is problematic. The logical reading is that Nephi is referring to their new families, including children. If so, then they evidently lingered in the valley for a longer time, and children were born before they renewed their journey.¹⁴

What seems to fit all the evidence is that there were extended stays—or delays—at more than one location, including the Valley of Lemuel, Nahom, and the sojourn in the wilderness between Nahom and Bountiful, as will be discussed later.

Geographically speaking, the most significant thing about the Valley of Lemuel is that there is a **fully qualified candidate**, brought to our attention by Potter and Wellington. Jeffrey R. Chadwick suggests an alternative location for the Valley of Lemuel in “one of the wadis near the shore at Bir Marsha,”¹⁵ but Potter has visited the area (Chadwick has not) and determined it to be a dry wadi.¹⁶ Potter and Wellington’s suggestion of Wadi Tayyib al-Isim, which they have visited multiple times, satisfactorily fits the description in 1 Nephi,¹⁷ and no other serious candidate has been presented.¹⁸ With further research and exploration, including a detailed and scientific survey of the area, we may one day be certain of the location. Until then, it’s a marvelous discovery that there is at least one place that qualifies as the Valley.

¹² The Hiltons point out that the Valley of Lemuel could have been considered by Nephi, especially from the perspective of the New World, as being in the “land of Jerusalem” (*Discovering Lehi*, 57).

¹³ Though it could also indicate extremely good timing on the family’s part to be there just as the seeds were ready to harvest.

¹⁴ To be sure, Nephi could be referring to his father’s family and those of the sons of Ishmael as “our families,” or he could possibly view each married couple as a “family” to account for the plural. But that is contrary to the Hebrew word which was surely behind Nephi’s text—*mishpāchâ*, meaning a clan or tribe, which has the sense of a group and not a man or even a couple with no offspring (*Brown-Driver-Briggs*), 1046-1047. For an example that contrasts a single man with a ‘clan,’ see Judges 18:19.

¹⁵ See Chadwick, “The Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail,” 202, 210-214; the quote is from 214.

¹⁶ See *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies (JBMS)* 8, no. 1 (1999), 60, and *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 32: “There are no other streams to be found in a wadi near the Gulf of Aqaba.”

¹⁷ For more details on the qualifications of Wadi Tayyib Al-Isim, see *Lehi in the Wilderness*, chapters 1 and 3, and *JBMS* 8, no. 1 (1999), 54-63.

¹⁸ Chadwick has spent much time north of the candidate sites but has not gone into Arabia as Potter and Wellington have done, who document their conclusions in *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 9-12, 31-39. Brown almost casually mentions “their starting place at Wadi Tayyib al-Isim,” demonstrating his acceptance of the location. Other previously suggested candidates include Wadi al-Afal (*Discovering Lehi*, 55) and a canal in Egypt (*Church News*, Jan 2, 1988; and *Improvement Era* 47, no. 1 (1944), 14-15, 56-61).

THE VALLEY OF LEMUEL TO SHAZER

1 Nephi 16:9-14a

After Lehi was commanded by the Lord to depart the Valley of Lemuel (16:9), he found “a **round ball** of curious workmanship” at his tent (16:10). This device was later called the “**Liahona**” (**Alma 37:38**) though Nephi never mentions that name.¹⁹ The party gathered their supplies, packed their tents, crossed the river Laman (16:11-12), and traveled “**south-southeast**” (16:13) for four days. After that short journey, they again pitched their tents and called the location “**Shazer**” (16:13), taking the opportunity to hunt for food (16:14), though it must have been some distance from their camp, because Nephi makes the point that they went “into the wilderness to slay food” and after that “did return again to our families.”

Water is very **limited** in Arabia. There are few wells, they are sometimes several days apart, and they are always controlled by local tribes. Trails exist only where water does also. It would **not be possible** for Lehi and his family to travel along the Arabian Peninsula without following these trails. The main trail running south from Aqaba to southern Arabia is known as the ‘**Frankincense Trail**,’ named after the main product exported from this part of the world. Rome, Greece, Egypt, and Judah, among others, all bought large quantities of frankincense, which only grows along the coast in what is today Yemen and Oman. Leaving the Valley of Lemuel at the east end, Lehi would have soon joined the Gaza branch of this trail.²⁰ Because the trail and wells were controlled by various tribes, Lehi and his company would have **paid tributes** or performed some **service**²¹ to have access to the water and protection from raiders. They would also need something to buy or trade for provisions and animals for sacrifice.

Potter and Wellington believe they located Shazer in the **Wadi Agharr**, a palm- and tamarisk-filled oasis valley many miles long. The water table is high here with many wells, and today it is farmed heavily. It is the only area within 100 miles (four days journey) of the Valley of Lemuel with those characteristics. The mountains nearby have ibex and small game to hunt. An ancient Greek writer says that in his day, there were **herds of deer, gazelles**, and other animals in this area. It certainly fits the description given by Nephi.²²

SHAZER TO THE "BROKEN BOW CAMP"

1 Nephi 16:14b-18

After stocking up at Shazer, they traveled again south-southeast for “**many days**,” following the “directions of the ball.” Fortunately, the ball led them into the “**most fertile parts** of the wilderness.” After a time, they entered the “**more fertile parts** of the wilderness,” hunting with bows and arrows and slings. Finally, after “many days,” they pitched their tents again to “rest ourselves and obtain food.” Here Nephi **broke his steel bow**, leaving the company without the means to hunt, since the other bows had “lost their springs” (1 Nephi 16:21).

The description of moving from the “**most**” fertile parts to the “**more**” fertile parts matches the conditions in Arabia along the Frankincense Trail. The most fertile parts of northwestern Arabia are from Dedan to Medina. Here along the ancient Frankincense Trail lie mile after mile of farms, surrounded on both sides by mountains and

¹⁹ This is evidence of Alma’s access to Lehi’s record, lost to us with the 116 pages. Alma gives the name as the one Lehi and Nephi used, though the name is nowhere recorded in our translation of Nephi’s small plates.

²⁰ The Frankincense Trail is not so much a road as a general direction linked by wells. There are often multiple trails between wells, but everything converges at the water supplies.

²¹ One international commerce attorney suggested that they used their knowledge of languages, reading, and writing to act as traveling scholars, trading teaching for food, water, and protection; see Potter (2003), 64.

²² Potter (2003), 76-78.

desert. The trail follows the supply of water that produces a line of fertility with enough to sustain an ample population. With wells and oases every few miles, abundant game in the nearby mountains, and fruit and berries growing naturally, the party would have been well supplied. Here in the text no one complains of hunger or challenges.

As they transition to the "more" fertile parts south of Medina, they mention the need to hunt for food again. South of Medina there is still game and water along the trail, though the farms and trees decidedly thin out.²³ Thus when Nephi's bow broke, the group was indeed in trouble.

1 Nephi 16:23, 32

Finding wood with which to make a bow and "a straight stick" to make an arrow, Nephi went hunting and returned with food enough for everyone. What Nephi doesn't say specifically, but which must have been the case, was that others in the group also made bows. Later they don't complain about a lack of hunting equipment, only a lack of targets (16:35).

Not all wood makes good bows. It has to be hard but flexible when dry. In Arabia, there is one main type of tree suitable for bowmaking, the *atim*, which is related to the olive tree. The *atim* tree only grows on the mountains of southern Arabia, in a **seventy mile strip at the 6,000-7,000 foot level, near Bishah**.²⁴ This is very likely where Nephi's group would have been after leaving the "most fertile parts" and continuing south-southeast in the "more fertile parts."

THE "BROKEN BOW CAMP" TO NAHOM

1 Nephi 16:33-39

The party continued their southward journey for "**many days**," then once again **made camp** to "tarry for the space of a time." While here, Ishmael died and they took him to a place of burial nearby **called Nahom**. The group mourned their loss, especially Ishmael's daughters, and began to murmur at their suffering. They became "desirous to return again to Jerusalem." The mourning led to threats of death against Lehi and Nephi (16:35-38). Only through the direct intervention of the Lord was the group chastened, humbled, and again able to obtain food (16:39).

Nahom is unique in the Book of Mormon. It's the only place in the journey through Arabia where the name was already existing: "the place *which was called* Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:34, italics added). This not only **implies encounters** with others by Lehi's party (else how did they know the name), but if the Book of Mormon is true, it should be a place that we can **readily identify** historically through other sources.

In the August 1978 Ensign, **Ross Christensen**, a BYU professor of archaeology, published an article describing a 1763 map of Arabia by a German mapmaker that included the place-name "Nehem." Located about twenty-five miles north of the Yemen capital of Sana'a, this area seemed to fit with the name of the place Nephi says Ishmael was buried, since in ancient Hebrew and Arabic vowels are not written, just consonants—both words resolve to the vowels **NHM**. In **Hebrew**, this is actually two words. The first means "to **comfort**" or "**console**." The second

²³ Potter and Wellington note that there are only five oases between Medina and Bishah, a distance of 750 miles; Potter (2003), 95.

²⁴ Other possible types, though much less readily available than *atim* in Arabia, are tamarisk, jujube, and acacia, all of which were used by the Egyptians for bows; Potter (2003), 102-103.

means to "**roar**," "**complain**," or "be **hungry**."²⁵ Given what happened at Nahom in the Book of Mormon— Ishmael's burial and the subsequent rebellion of many in the party—both definitions seem quite appropriate.²⁶

Nothing else was investigated on Nahom until in **1984 Warren and Michaela Aston**, two curious members from Australia, traveled to Yemen to try and find some additional evidence. Braving primitive conditions (as indicated by one paved street in the whole capital city), language barriers, and red tape galore, they were able to visit the area. Additional research discovered a multitude of references to NHM in a variety of Islamic and even pre-Islamic literature, including by Mohammed himself. They learned that NHM was traditionally a **burial ground**, today being excavated by a French team.

The most recent finding, however, ties right into Lehi and Nephi. A number of **altars** have been found by a **German archaeological team** working in the **Bar'an temple in Marib**, Yemen. Three of these bear the inscription, "**Bi'athar, son of Sawad, son of Naw'an, the Nihmite**."²⁷ The altars are dated to the **seventh or sixth centuries B.C.**—Lehi's time. This confirms that there was a tribal area named NHM in the place that Nephi says was called Nahom at the time they were there. The first altar was brought to the attention of the LDS audience by S. Kent Brown. Aston, in a visit to the location, found one more altar. A third has been excavated by the Germans, all three dating to Lehi's time with the NHM inscription.

The place where the altars were found is **Marib**, the ancient capital of the Sabaeen kingdom (Sheba) where there was a **massive dam** being built right as Lehi and company went through the area. Here were many miles of **farmlands**, irrigated by a **water supply** that has mostly disappeared today, supporting a large ancient population very different from the Bedouin people there today. Here Lehi's group could have needed and been able to stay for some time, though it may have been under difficult circumstances.

A careful reading of the passage highlights two details. First, they *arrived* at this camping location, and **while tarrying there** Ishmael died. There is nothing in Nephi's record to indicate that Ishmael died on the trail and was carried by the group until they could bury him at Nahom, as some have suggested. It is true there are scriptural accounts of ancient Israelites carrying their dead to a known, traditional burial location.²⁸ But it is unlikely the group, moving through unfamiliar territory, would have been aware of Nahom as a potential burial ground and transported the body there, had Ishmael died on the open trail. Instead, Nephi indicates they buried him near their camp, where he died.²⁹ This concurs with a strong cultural and scriptural mandate to bury a body quickly, preferably on the same day as death.³⁰ Indeed, that is exactly the tone of Nephi's words: "Ishmael died, and was buried" (16:34)—one event immediately following the other.

²⁵ Aston (1994), 12; also Brown (2001), 625 and 636.

²⁶ Of course, Arabic was the local language in NHM in Lehi's day, but even in Arabic, the related word *nahama* means "soft groan, sigh, moan"; Aston (1994), 12.

²⁷ Brown (2003), 112; Aston (2001), 56.

²⁸ Genesis contains what is probably the most detailed account of carrying a body to a known location. Knowing he was near death, Jacob carefully instructed Joseph to take his remains back to the family burial grounds (Gen 47:29-30). Joseph did as his father asked and transported his body back to the cave Machpelah in Canaan where Abraham and Sarah were laid (Gen 50:5-7). But this is an example of exactly what Brown cites: a body being "returned to its traditional burial place." Ishmael was far from home with no traditional site nearby.

²⁹ Scriptural examples show people being buried near where they died, including Rachel's nurse, Deborah (Gen 35:8); Rachel herself (Gen 35:19-20); Miriam (Num 20:1); and Saul and his sons (1 Sam 31:12-13).

³⁰ Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 364. The practical matter is that carrying Ishmael's body around in the hot desert for any period of time would also present a challenge in terms of the body decaying and smelling.

Second, Nahom is only mentioned as the *burial place* for Ishmael. The fact that they were camped nearby is implied because no mention is given of a long journey to bury Ishmael. But Nephi never says they *camped* at Nahom. The point is minor but perhaps helpful in discovering a more exact starting point of the turn eastward—we can't know it from Nephi's description alone. As the articles describe, NHM is a broad area, a tribal territory rather than a single location. Nephi doesn't give details about their campsite, though we can confidently associate their resting place and the turn east with the larger area called NHM.³¹ However, we cannot simply draw a line from the now-certain NHM burial place eastward to find Bountiful. We don't know how close the family camped to Ishmael's grave (and thus their starting place) and we can't be certain of the exact path of the group, just that it was "nearly eastward" (17:1).

The marvelous fact is that there *is* an archaeologically confirmed **NHM right where Nephi says it should be** and right at the time in history described in the record. This is one of the most stunning discoveries related to Book of Mormon geography. Finding a stele in Mesoamerica saying "Zarahemla" would be no more remarkable. There was series of steps that led to these discoveries—Ross Christensen's first observing the name on an old map; Aston's investigations of place names in the region; the discovery by a German archaeological team of three altars being the tribal name NHM; and Brown's and Aston's bringing them to our attention. These altars have provided the single most concrete evidence of the veracity and antiquity of Nephi's record to date.

FROM NAHOM TO BOUNTIFUL

1 Nephi 17:1-6

Nephi says that at Nahom the party turned the direction of their journey "**nearly eastward.**" Joseph Smith did not nor could have known that it is just south of Nahom, at the **Jawf valley**, that the **Incense Trail turns** abruptly from a north-south direction to an east-west one.

Nephi notes that it took **eight years** for the group to go from Jerusalem to Bountiful—a distance of about **2,100 miles**. But other groups traveling the same route in ancient days did it in less **than three months**.³² So why did the group take so long? Certainly there were **pauses** along the way—at the Valley of Lemuel, Shazer, and Nahom. They could have stayed a year or more at each one, long enough to grow and harvest or purchase and trade for grain, dates, and other supplies. But S. Kent Brown suggests that they may well have been caught up in a tribal situation for a time that brought them into **bondage**—a short-term **slavery** arrangement—in exchange for eventual passage through the area of southern Arabia.³³

We get that impression both from King **Benjamin (Mosiah 1:17)** and **Alma (Alma 36:28-29)**. Additionally intriguing are Alma's words to the people of Ammonihah, which invite them to remember "the tradition of [their] fathers" (Alma 9:8), meaning "our father, Lehi" being "brought out of Jerusalem by the hand of God" (Alma 9:9). In the next breath, Alma reiterates how the Lord "delivered our fathers out of the hands of their enemies, and preserved

³¹ It could be the family camped at (using the modern names) Wadi Jawf, Furdath Naham, Wadi Naham, or even Marib, where they would have found much water and food. See the Nahom map in Wellington and Potter's article or the maps on pages 114 and 117 in *Lehi in the Wilderness*. There may even have been more than one camp, one in a harsher place before Ishmael's death and another later, since it was not until after the murmuring ceased that Nephi reports they were able to get food (16:39).

³² Strabo records that a caravan of Roman soldiers went from Aqaba to Yemen in seventy days; other estimates for commercial caravans are between 69 and 88 days; Potter (2003), 53.

³³ Brown (1997), 205.

them” (Alma 9:10). That “our fathers” refers to Lehi and his family seems apparent from in **Alma 9:9-13**.³⁴ From Brown’s observations and these indications from the text, it appears the family spent significant time, perhaps most or, in my reading of the text, even all of the eight years, and conceivably suffered bondage in the passage between the Nahom area and Bountiful.³⁵

Many locations have been proposed for Bountiful. Thinking today concentrates in western Oman along the south Arabian coastline. The Astons propose one candidate for Bountiful (**Khor Kharfot**), Potter another (**Khor Rori**), and the Hiltons another (**Salalah**). Setting aside the debate, what's interesting is that there *exist* several potential locations that all qualify. When Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon and even as recently as **1975**, critics cited this description of a rich land with honey and fruit as an evidence that the **Book of Mormon was clearly a fake!** The abundance of evidence of Bountiful-like locations just where Joseph Smith said they were refutes the critics.

BOUNTIFUL

1 Nephi 17:7 – 18:4 (don’t read)

Everything in Nephi’s narrative leads us to Bountiful. All analysis leads to the same conclusion: the location of Bountiful must be on the southern coast of the Arabian peninsula in modern-day Oman. The thin, green band of trees, flowers, and grass in the Dhofar coasts of Oman is not just the best choice for Nephi to build his ship, it is the only choice.

Various candidates for Bountiful have been proposed in the Dhofar region, including the two most likely to date, **Wadi Sayq/Khor Kharfot** and **Khor Rori**.³⁶ Either site is a viable candidate with strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the other. Though the evidence appears to be leaning in favor of Khor Kharfot,³⁷ we must exercise caution: we have not found nor are likely to find any specific evidence of Lehi and company living in the area. The best that can be done is to continue meticulously examining the text for all its described characteristics, then continue to compare the various sites to the list. In the end, if two or more sites appear qualified, it’s all the more amazing, because no one in 1830—and at least one author as late as 1985—allowed that such a place even existed.³⁸

The list of things that have to be **found in Bountiful** include:

- The area is east of NHM (17:1).
- Travelers can reach the coast from the desert interior through valleys that drop down to the coast.
- It is generally fertile, with favorable winds and sufficient rain for water and plant life (17:5-6).
- It is on the coast and there are several natural harbors in which to build and launch ships (17:5-6; 18:8).
- There is wild honey, fruits, fish, and animal to hunt (17:5-6; 18:6).

³⁴ He clearly has the same limited meaning for “our fathers” in Alma 37:38.

³⁵ Though fiction, an engaging representation of this concept is found in H. B. Moore, *Out of Jerusalem, vol. 2, A Light in the Wilderness* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, Inc.: 2005), 173-239.

³⁶ The Astons carefully document six potential sites before lobbying for their favorite, Wadi Sayq/Khor Kharfot; see *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, 11, 37-59. Brown comments that there are “as many as a dozen inlet bays, any one of which could have served Nephi’s shipbuilding needs.”

³⁷ Aston thoroughly documents the advantages of his favorite, Khor Kharfot, well in his article, though not without dispute from Potter and Wellington as they promote Khor Rori, and who claim a “growing body of evidence” supporting their preferred Bountiful location. The most persuasive factor for me is that Khor Rori was well-populated at the time, while Khor Kharfot appears to have been sparsely populated, if at all when Lehi arrived.

³⁸ *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, 28.

- There is sufficient timber of the right quality to build ships (18:1, 2, 6).
- There is abundant freshwater available.
- There are many mountains nearby (17:7, 18:3).
- There are cliffs (17:48).
- There is ore that can be used to smelt tools (17:9-11, 16) and flint to start fires (17:11).
- There are suitable winds and currents to take the group in the right direction (18:8-9).

It seems fair to say that the family was certainly not alone at Bountiful. Although the text gives no hint that their specific location was occupied when they arrived,³⁹ it would have been quite impossible to avoid all contact with the thriving population in the larger Dhofar area during the two or more years it took to build the ship. Even the name they give the sea, *Irreantum*, is evidence for interaction with others. If it is indeed South Semitic, as has been suggested,⁴⁰ they had to learn the word from someone there who already spoke it.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

Like the Lehite party moving through Arabia, as we “**again take our journey**” (16:33; 17:1) in the Book of Mormon, each step forward provides additional evidence supporting what the Spirit has taught to millions—it is a **true ancient record**.

Nibley boldly said, “**1 Nephi cannot possibly be explained on the grounds of mere coincidence.**”⁴² He identified over a hundred “searching questions” about Lehi’s story, reminding us that “**no one on earth could have answered [them] correctly**” in **Joseph Smith’s day**.⁴³ In our collective voyage of discovery since Nibley issued that challenge, we have progressed sufficiently to **answer** with certainty **many** of the questions and address the **rest** with high **confidence**. Significantly, we are steadily upgrading answers from confidence to certainty with each passing year.

As a people, we owe a debt of gratitude to people like Hugh Nibley who first tantalized us with a Near Eastern setting for the book, and President Ezra Taft Benson who challenged us to make it a part of the daily fabric of our lives.⁴⁴ We are also grateful to Nibley’s successors, including S. Kent Brown, Warren and Michaela Aston, George Potter, Richard Wellington, Lynn and Hope Hilton, Jeffrey Chadwick, and a host of others whose work and thinking are represented in a number of publications. While more will surely come forth in the approaching years, we can now say with confidence that the **general route is sure** and the many **details** of their journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful are **increasingly clear**.

There is no way that a young farm boy from New York state, with little education and opportunity for learning anything about the Middle East and especially Arabia in the sixth century B.C., could have produced on his own a book that gets so many details correct. Even **if Joseph Smith had access** to and could read the **greatest materials**

³⁹ A clue is that they give the place a name of their choosing, instead of adopting the established local name as they did at Nahom.

⁴⁰ *JBMS* 11, 90-93.

⁴¹ This is further evidence for the longer sojourn and bondage in southern Arabia after Nahom, for when they arrive in Bountiful they are already familiar enough with the language to easily use a noun from it instead of their own Hebrew word for sea, *yam*.

⁴² *Lehi in the Desert*, 119.

⁴³ *Lehi in the Desert*, 117.

⁴⁴ Two examples include: Ezra Taft Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1988, 4; and Ezra Taft Benson, “The Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1992, 2. On the emergence of the Book of Mormon in the modern Church, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century.”

about Arabia in English, German, French, Arabic, and other languages available in his day, those materials would not have told him about **Nahom**, **Bountiful**, the **Valley of Lemuel** and the **River of Laban**, and more which has come to light since 1830. The more time goes on, the more **vindicated** and **verified** is **Joseph Smith**.

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