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Title In Search of Lehi's Trail—30 Years Later

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Abstract Thirty years after publishing *In Search of Lehi's Trail*, Lynn M. Hilton looks back at the progress of research on the journey of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem to Bountiful. Hilton starts by briefly reviewing the known aspects of the party's travel, such as the location of Jerusalem and their initial "south-southeast direction." Following their trail, he gives an overview of the discoveries that have helped identify and describe potential sites for several key locales mentioned in Nephi's narrative of the journey: the Valley of Lemuel, Nahom, and Bountiful. In the past thirty years, many important discoveries have expanded our understanding of the real-life setting of Lehi's travel through the Arabian Peninsula.

In Search of Lehi's Trail



30 Years Later

DURING THE ALMOST 30 YEARS since my late wife Hope and I published the results of our investigations on the trek of Lehi and Sariah, which we titled *In Search of Lehi's Trail*,¹ a growing number of studies have appeared that have continued both to refine and broaden our understanding of that remarkable journey into the heated landscape of the Arabian desert. It is now possible to say that certain results are assured while others are virtually assured. Let us review some fixed points from Nephi's narrative.

First, of course, we know where the Jerusalem of Lehi's day stood—in

Lynn M. Hilton



the same place as the modern city. Second, we know where the Red Sea lies, one of the very important geographical realities from Nephi's account, for it allows us to orient ourselves properly when trying to reconstruct the journey of Lehi and Sariah. Third, we know the wilderness through which they and their party traveled, that of the Arabian Peninsula. From later clues in Nephi's story, it becomes clear that the party did not strike off into the interior of Arabia, the forbidding Empty Quarter, in the initial, long leg of traveling but remained on the western side of the peninsula by traveling in "nearly a south-southeast direction" (1 Nephi

16:13). Fourth, we are confident of the general area where the party finally emerged from the desert, their “Bountiful,” the place where they built their oceangoing ship (see 1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1–4). This locale must have lain along the southern coast of the modern sultanate of Oman, an area called Dhofar, whose mountains catch the summer monsoon rains and create a green paradise across the maritime plain. It is the only place along the Arabian coastline that matches Nephi’s botanical description of a spot with “much fruit and also wild honey” as well as “timbers” (1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1). Fifth, in a different vein, it is certain that the family owned pack animals. The animals of choice then as now were camels since they were best suited for desert travel. The party members needed them because they took “tents” whose weight was far too great for humans or smaller animals to carry (see 1 Nephi 2:4; 3:9; 16:12).

We start at the beginning of Nephi’s spare narrative. Although his report does not allow us to know the route his parents followed in their departure from Jerusalem—and several were open to them²—we can be reasonably confident about the location of the first camp “in the borders which are

nearer the Red Sea,” where the word *borders* may refer to mountainous terrain (1 Nephi 2:5).³ When I first sought to identify the locale of this camp, I suggested that it was near the oasis settlement of al-Bad^c in a rather broad valley that descends southward to the Red Sea and lies north and east of the Straits of Tiran. This valley is lined on either side by hills and mountains.⁴ Al-Bad^c is an ancient stopping place for travelers and features wells that offer refreshing water to visitors and residents alike. In addition, during rainstorms, I have observed streams spring to life, which, when combined with the impressive distant mountain peaks, I thought might fit Lehi’s River of Laman and Valley of Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:8–10). However, in May 1995, almost serendipitously, two Latter-day Saints, George Potter and Craig Thorsted, happened into an impressive canyon—called a *wadi* in Arabic—some 75 miles south of modern Aqaba, Jordan, and a dozen miles northwest of al-Bad^c, wherein ran a “continually running” stream of water (1 Nephi 2:9).

The discovery was almost too good to be true. Running between walls of granite rock that rise 2,000 feet above the wadi floor was a gentle stream



Left: The upper reaches of Wadi Tayyib al-Isa looking southward toward the Gulf of Aqaba.

Right: The lower part of the wadi is a narrow canyon with towering granite walls and a perennial stream. Photos courtesy George Potter.

that, upon inspection, was found to flow above ground for most of the 3.75 miles of the canyon's length. At different times of the year, Potter has returned to this impressive canyon, named Wadi Tayyib al-Ism ("the valley of the good name"), and has learned that the stream runs continuously throughout the year—even though its flow has been diminished in recent years by modern pumping—and comes within a few yards of reaching the Red Sea. The stream thus meets the chief criterion for Lehi's River of Laman—"continually running" (see 1 Nephi 2:8–9). Potter has also examined the neighboring valleys that open onto the Red Sea and has found no other "continually running" stream like this one.⁵ These observations allow us to be confident that we now know the general locale of the party's first camp—it lay in this wadi, the only place within "three days" of walking⁶ from the northeast tip of the Red Sea where a person can

three votive altars that bear the tribal name *NHM* in the ancient South Arabian language. These altars all date to the seventh–sixth centuries BC, when Lehi and Sariah were on their trek, and they were all donated by a man named "Bi'athar, son of Sawād, son of Naw'ān," to the Bar'ān temple near Marib, Yemen.⁷ Called "the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon,"⁸ these altars prove the existence of this name as a territorial and tribal area in southwestern Arabia in the first millennium BC. In this connection, the late Professor Ross T. Christensen published a short notice in 1978 in the *Ensign* magazine about the appearance of the tribal name "Nehhm" on a map drawn by a German explorer to Arabia in the 18th century.⁹ This notice prompted Warren Aston to further investigation, the results of which showed that the name *NHM* or *Nihm* was known to the Muslim historians al-



find a "continually running" stream—one that, as a confirming bonus, flows to the edge of the sea (see 1 Nephi 2:6).

A second locale, now firmly established, is that of Nahom, where "Ishmael died, and was buried" (1 Nephi 16:34). The antiquity of this name is secure because of the archaeological recovery of

Kalbi and al-Hamdāni as early as the 9th and 10th centuries AD, clearly indicating that the name long predated these authors.¹⁰ It was the publication of this name on the first of the three altars that demonstrated conclusively that *NHM* or *Nihm* was contemporary with Lehi and Sariah. The second and third altars have cinched the conclusion.

One of the most compelling pieces of Nephi's narrative that we now know matches the circumstances of ancient Arabia has to do with the eastward turn of his party (see 1 Nephi 17:1). In effect, all roads—including shortcuts across forbidding desert terrain—turned east at the Nahom tribal area. This peculiar tradition in this region, which was mandated for caravans by law,¹¹ could not have been known to contemporaries of Joseph Smith. It has become evident only with the modern study of the fabled Incense Trail and the civilizations of Arabia that benefited from the harvesting and shipping of frankincense and myrrh.¹² Because Lehi's group turned eastward in this region, it seems evident that they had been generally following or shadowing the north-south segment of the trail, which connects southern Arabia with the Mediterranean area. After all, the trail already featured an infrastructure of wells and places to obtain food and fodder. By turning eastward in this region, they effectively turned against the traffic that was traveling from east to west, coming out of the city of Shabwah, the main incense-gathering center. In all, when we combine the notice of the eastward turn with the known locale of the Nahom tribal region where Ishmael was buried, we establish firmly the area through which Lehi and Sariah must have passed with their group.¹³

There is one other important part of the story that connects to the eastward turn: the location of Bountiful. For Nephi writes that from Nahom "we did travel nearly eastward from that time forth." Then he writes, "We did come to the land which we called Bountiful [and] . . . we did pitch our tents by the seashore" (1 Nephi 17:1, 5-6). Hence, we should

look for a locale on the southern coast of Arabia that lies almost due east of the Nahom tribal area and that features the botanical characteristics of "much fruit, and also wild honey" as well as "timbers" (1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1). That general locale turns out to be the south coast of the sultanate of Oman. This region is unique because it receives a lot of rain during the summer monsoon season when the southwest winds blow across the Arabian Sea, gathering moisture and pushing rain-laden clouds against the high mountains. From late May to early September, there is a more or less steady drizzle that turns the coastal area into a lush garden. This unique botanical region is bounded on the north by the desert and on the south by the sea. In addition, the coastline features a number of inlet bays that could have served as the place for building Nephi's ship. Some of these bays are more attractive for Nephi's shipbuilding than others because of location and size. The important thing is that Nephi could have constructed his ship out of the reach of the pounding surf that characterizes the summer monsoon season.

In sum, many parts of Nephi's account have come into sharper focus during the 30 years since I began to work on the trek that Lehi and his family undertook. As students of the Book of Mormon continue to study the narrative in light of what we can learn about ancient Arabia, they will shed light on other parts of his narrative. As will become clear, the accompanying studies attempt to move our understanding further forward by refining questions and answers about the journey of Lehi and Sariah that, after their day, became the subject of celebrations by later generations (see Mosiah 2:4). 📖

Burial mound in the valley of Nahom/Nihm.
Photo by Justin Andrews.

ENDNOTES

In Search of Lehi's Trail—30 Years Later

Lynn M. Hilton

- Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976). This book grew out of a discovery trip sponsored by the *Ensign* magazine, and before going, we were set apart by a General Authority for the task. Our effort resulted in the book that was based on our two articles titled "In Search of Lehi's Trail," *Ensign*, September and October 1976, 32–54 and 34–63, respectively. Since then, we have published our further research in *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996).
- For discussions of possible routes, consult Hilton, "In Search of Lehi's Trail," September, 38; October, 36–37; D. Kelly Ogden, "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), 17–33, especially 23; S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 55–125, especially 56–60, 99–100; S. Kent Brown, *Voices from the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2004), 3; S. Kent Brown and Peter Johnson, eds., *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006) and the *Journey of Faith* DVD (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2006).
- Concerning "borders" as mountains, consult Alma 8:3; 21:1; Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," 77–79; George D. Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New, Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 25.
- Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail*, 62–74.
- See George D. Potter, "A New Candidate in Arabia for the 'Valley of Lemuel,'" *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 54–63, and the photo of the canyon mouth on the Red Sea inside the back cover of the same issue. Students of Arabia have concluded that there are no perennial streams in the peninsula; see Rushdi Said's statement "The Red Sea . . . is left without a single flowing river. In this respect the Red Sea is unique and without rival," in *The River Nile: Geology, Hydrology and Utilization* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1993), 7. George Rentz also writes that "Arabia contains no large perennial rivers" ("Djazirat, al-'Arab," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* [Leiden: Brill, 1960–], 1:537).
- David R. Seely has shown that the "three days" (1 Nephi 2:6) was a distance required if a person wanted to offer sacrifice away from the Jerusalem temple; see his "Lehi's Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness," *JBMS* 10/1 (2001): 62–69.
- See S. Kent Brown, "The Place That Was Called Nahom: New Light from Ancient Yemen," *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 66–68; and Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *JBMS* 10/2 (2001): 56–61.
- Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120.
- Consult Ross T. Christensen, "The Place Called Nahom," *Ensign*, August 1978, 73. The map appears in Carsten Niebuhr, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und den umliegenden Ländern*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Möller, 1774, 1778, and 1837, reprint: Graz: Akademische Druck, 1968), 1:4–5. On whether Joseph Smith could have known this name from any published sources in his day, see Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," 69–76.
- Warren P. Aston and Michaela Knoth Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi's Journey across Arabia to Bountiful* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 5–25 and endnotes 23–26. This book was preceded by their study "The Search for Nahom and the End of Lehi's Trail in Southern Arabia," FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988).
- See Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman, 1981), 169–70, 181, 183–84.
- See Brown and Johnson, *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land*, 152–63.
- See Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," 89; S. Kent Brown, "Nahom and the 'Eastward' Turn," *JBMS* 12/1 (2003): 111–12; and Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 107–20.

Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah: "Truth Shall Spring out of the Earth"

Warren P. Aston

Much of the material for this article is taken from my book *Lehi in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (forthcoming, 2007).

- The foundational works in Old World Book of Mormon studies are Hugh Nibley's *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); and *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988). Of immense value also are Robert F. Smith, "Book of Mormon Event Structure: The Ancient Near East," *JBMS* 5/2 (1996): 98–147, especially his section "The Arabian Nexus," which places Lehi's life in its Near Eastern context; and John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004). Other publications, such as Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002) and the publication of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, illustrate how completely Book of Mormon studies has expanded into all areas of scholarly inquiry and increasingly draws upon appropriate secular studies.
- Those whose roots lie in Near Eastern rather than Western culture have an immediate and instinctive appreciation of the details recorded by Nephi. See, for example, the response by an Arab member of the LDS Church, Ehab Abunuwara, "Into the Desert: An Arab View of the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 11/1 (2002): 60–65.
- Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), xiv.
- See John W. Welch's analysis in "The Power of Evidence in the Nurturing of Faith," in Parry, Peterson, and Welch, *Echoes and Evidences*, 17–53. On the limitations of archaeology, see John E. Clark, head of the New World Archaeological Foundation, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief," *JBMS* 14/2 (2005): 38–49.
- The most comprehensive study of the ancient incense trade remains Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman, 1981).
- Depending on the terrain, the season, the breed and maturity of the animal, and the loads carried, camels can cover 20–25 miles a day. See Gus W. Van Beek, "The Rise and Fall of Arabia Felix," *Scientific American* 41, December 1969, 36–47.
- On the need for Lehi to pay levies and seek tribal permission en route, see Emanuel Marx, "Back to the Problem of Tribe," *American Anthropologist* 81/1 (1979): 124, highlighting reasons why a small, noncommercial family group would have presented little threat to local tribes, who often allowed travelers the use of water and pasture. Alongside caravans of hundreds or even thousands of camels, the Lehiters would have seemed insignificant.
- For a discussion of the types of sacrifices offered, see