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Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton. *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*

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**Abstract:** Review of *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia* (1996), by Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton.



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**Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton. *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*, rev. and enl. Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 1996. 208 pp., with bibliography and subject index. \$17.95.**

Reviewed by Warren P. Aston

From a 1997 perspective it is possible to look back nearly three decades and see how much Arabian Book of Mormon studies owe their current impetus to the vision and effort of just a few individuals.

The development of a rotating adult scripture curriculum by the church in the early 1970s necessitated a review of available materials by the *Ensign* editorial staff under Jay Todd, managing editor. For more than a decade previously, Todd had pondered the idea of Latter-day Saints visiting the areas through which Lehi might have traveled, and he was well aware that virtually nothing had been done in the field of Arabian studies by Latter-day Saint scholars since Hugh Nibley's 1950 series of articles, *Lehi in the Desert*.

In 1975, Lynn and Hope Hilton of Salt Lake City, who had visited the Middle East often and had business interests in Egypt, were invited by Todd on behalf of the *Ensign* to make the journey. They did so early in 1976, accompanied by their daughter and a photographer. On this first trip they were able to spend only one day in Salalah in Oman, but they began examining the routes that Lehi might have followed from Jerusalem and down the coast of the Red Sea.

It would be a mistake to regard this new book as merely an updated version of their original 1976 work, *In Search of Lehi's Trail*,<sup>1</sup> which was also excerpted in the September and October issues of the *Ensign* that year. Twenty years later, *Discovering Lehi*, subtitled *New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*, contains about twice the material of its predecessor, and most of the

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976).

original photography has been replaced with other, more useful pictures, maps, and diagrams. Most of the new material in the book has already been published since 1976 in a variety of places and is here brought together around the common theme of the Lehite land journey across Arabia.

Moving sequentially through the book, the Hiltons first give an updated summary of the research they undertook in the months before their 1976 trip, effectively giving an overview of Arabian history and an outline of the entire desert odyssey—more than 2,500 miles—that Lehi made, preparing the reader for the very mixed offerings that follow.

One of the book's strengths is its incorporation of enough supplementary and anecdotal material to paint a fairly comprehensive and accurate picture of Arabian culture and customs for those not familiar with that part of the world. The authors attempt to tackle most aspects of Nephi's account of the journey: the composition of the group, the mode of travel, geography, desert life, and customs.

In view of the essentially geographical nature of this work, I was surprised that the authors do not more adequately discuss the place where Lehi probably lived (and from which he presumably departed); they usually treat the city of Jerusalem as Lehi's home instead of the much more likely "land of Jerusalem." Here too, perhaps, the Hiltons missed the chance to raise—and hopefully rebut—the issue of the so-called "Lehi Cave," which seems to have become somewhat embedded in popular Mormon awareness.

Chapter 4 easily demolishes an ill-thought-out idea, published surprisingly enough in the *Church News* in 1988, that the Lehite journey could have been down through Egypt rather than over the Arabian peninsula, thus ending in a Bountiful on the Somali coast on the Horn of Africa.<sup>2</sup>

The next chapter returns us to the trail. It is vintage Hilton, giving us the only Latter-day Saint analysis to date of the lengthiest section of the entire overland journey made by the Lehites: the route followed from Jerusalem to Nahom. Inserted in the midst of this analysis is some interesting material, based on recent

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<sup>2</sup> "Lehi's Journey Still Sparks Interest," including two items: Rachel Schoonmaker, "BYU Students Relive the Trek," and Josiah Douglas, "He May Have Gone Another Way," *Church News*, 2 January 1988, 11, 13.

scholarship, on the likely site for Mt. Sinai—relevant, as the Hiltons point out, because Lehi may have been following a well-established tradition in fleeing Jerusalem to the mount.

After a full chapter spent discussing Semitic marriage customs, chapters 7 and 8 make the Hiltons' case that missionary preaching by Lehi and Nephi during their passage through Arabia may have spawned a civilization known to scholars as the "Lehyanites." This idea, however, is introduced through what I believe is the unwarranted assumption that Doctrine and Covenants 33:8 indicates that Nephi preached to large numbers of people during the passage to Bountiful, converting many of them. This latter-day scripture, of course, actually refers to Nephi's rebuking his rebellious brothers (2 Nephi 1:27–8), and I see no hint anywhere in scripture that the Lehites actively preached their beliefs in Arabia, much less made converts in such numbers that a new civilization resulted. This does not mean, of course, that it could not or did not happen, only that it cannot be supported scripturally.

The Lehyanite nation, centered in the general area of northern Arabia, where the valley of Lemuel and Shazer must have been located, was prominent between about 500 and 200 B.C., after which time the people were conquered by the Nabateans. Noting the similarity to Lehi's name, the Hiltons have proposed for some years now that the designation *Lehyanites* may derive from Lehi's time in this area and, specifically, that the Lehyanites were possible descendants of Nephi's converts.

The Hiltons cover what little is known of the history of the area, the archaeological evidence for the nation, and anecdotal hints that the Lehyanites may have been "Jewish." Much attention is focused by the authors on a large circular vessel with interior steps that still stands amidst the ruins of a Lehyanite temple or sanctuary, suggesting, as they see it, that it may be the Arabian equivalent of the font in Solomon's Temple.

It is worth noting that the Lehyanites are not the only possible imprint of the prophet Lehi in tribal Arabia; other parallels suggestive of Lehi's prophetic role have been noted on the other side of the Arabian peninsula.<sup>3</sup> At the end of it all, however, as is so

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<sup>3</sup> William J. Hamblin, "Pre-Islamic Arabian Prophets," in *Mormons and Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1983), 85–104.

often the case in these matters, all we are left with is some interesting possibilities. Far too little is yet known about early Arabia to strengthen a link with the historical Lehi, and other explanations are readily available for every point advanced, attractive and intriguing as they may be to Latter-day Saints.

To their credit, over the years the Hiltons have usually been quick to acknowledge research advances by others in the areas covered by their book. Thus we find their acceptance that the Book of Mormon Nahom is located at the place of the same name in the Yemen Arab Republic, rather than at Al Qunfidhah in Saudi Arabia as they had speculated in their first book.<sup>4</sup> The modern place (actually pronounced “Neh-Hem” in Yemen today, as opposed to the pronunciation given in the book) is closer to being at a latitude of 16 degrees north, not at the “about 15 degrees” repeated throughout the book.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 11 develops what is certainly the most controversial theory that the Hiltons have advanced to date—that the “skin of darkness” placed upon the Lamanites by the Lord in the New World resulted from Laman and Lemuel taking additional dark-skinned Arab wives while en route to Bountiful. For me, while interesting and even superficially attractive as providing a naturalistic explanation for the dark skins, this chapter contributed less to the book than any other.

The Hiltons, who continually picture the Lehites arriving in a New World totally devoid of other people (see pages 73 and 143, for example), seem unaware of the competent scholarship that accounts for such matters as skin color and population sizes, and which, therefore, would negate or at least make unnecessary many of the points raised in this book. Years ago, for example, John Sorenson, noting Near Eastern parallels, pointed out that the Nephite view of the Lamanites was probably based more on their

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<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence from Lynn Hilton to Warren Aston dated 25 July 1987.

<sup>5</sup> The present-day tribal area of Nahom extends from roughly 15 degrees 45 minutes to 16 degrees 20 minutes north; thus a median of 16 degrees is more accurate. The more northern figure is actually preferable, as the Lehi departure point would have been from the encampment in the Jawf plain rather than from Ishmael's burial site, which was almost certainly in the elevated hills in the south. Khor Kharfot, the only location that meets Bountiful's scriptural description, is at a latitude of 16 degrees and 44 minutes north.

antipathy toward their straying brethren than on any desire to provide an objective description of skin color.<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, nowhere do the Hiltons identify any Arab tribes with skins noticeably darker than other Semitic groups, nor do I believe it is possible to do so.

But, more seriously, the Hiltons fail to come to grips with what the scriptures actually say about the “dark skin.” Alma 3:7, for example, explicitly asserts that the skin of darkness was given to “*Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael, and Ishmaelish women*”—wording that negates the basis for the Hiltons’ theory. Furthermore, Jacob—writing only a short time after arriving in the New World—explained that the very reason the Lamanites would not be destroyed was that, unlike many of the Nephites, they had *not* forgotten the Lord’s commandment prohibiting plural wives, concubines, and whoredoms (Jacob 3:5).

Clearly, the identifying mark placed upon these people came about by some other agency than intermarriage. It is one thing to point out or suggest possible contributions from the cultural milieu through which the Lehites passed, but quite another to ignore key relevant scriptures and to base a theory completely on assumptions and forced cultural “parallels,” as seems to happen constantly in this section of the book.

Before dealing with the final stages of *Discovering Lehi*, mention needs to be made of one of the appendixes at the end of the book. The first, “The Hand as a Cup in Ancient Temple Worship,” is alone worth the purchase price of the book and is a sensitively worded but potent reminder that our sacred ordinances are rooted in antiquity. In other words, they are demonstrably not merely arbitrary or random products of Joseph Smith’s imagination or his environment. As we see that the ordinances have a basis in the real world, our appreciation of their symbolism is immeasurably enhanced. A number of other examples from the ancient world of human figures in ritual positions are strongly suggestive of our own ordinances, but I was pleased to see this paper incorporated into the book because of its very limited circulation

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<sup>6</sup> John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 89–91.

since it was given at a 1981 symposium. It deserves greater exposure.

The book rightly comes to a focus and conclusion at Nephi's Bountiful, the place marking the transition from the Old to the New World in the Book of Mormon. The Hiltons departed on their 1976 journey believing that the only viable candidate for Bountiful must be Salalah in modern Oman, basing this on Nibley's studies, which in turn relied on the 1932 eyewitness account of Bertram Thomas. So far as the location of Bountiful is concerned, they now accept that Khor Kharfot (usually referred to as Wadi Sayq in the text) is "probably the best proposed [site] to date" (p. 153).<sup>7</sup> But they still express concerns. Curiously, here as elsewhere in their book, the Hiltons omit any mention of the book *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, published in 1994, and rely only on the preliminary reports on both Nahom and Bountiful published by FARMS in 1991.<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, unfortunate since the book was a more current source of data.

In any consideration of where Bountiful might be, the pivotal scripture is Nephi's unambiguous statement that travel from Nahom to Bountiful was in a "nearly eastward" direction (1 Nephi 17:1). Like others before and since, the Hiltons seem to have trouble accepting the clear implications of this scripture. It is clear from the text that the Lehites were doing anything but merely following a trading route complete with water holes on this last, most difficult, and dangerous stage of the entire journey. Geography, historical facts, and even common sense are sometimes abandoned here as the authors try to make the facts fit their original Salalah theory, aided by a series of maps which tend to confuse rather than clarify.

Thus we find, for example, a statement on page 34 that the journey from Nahom to Bountiful took "about 35 days." No basis or logic for this figure is ever given, but I suspect that it was

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<sup>7</sup> Earlier personal correspondence from Lynn and Hope Hilton to Warren Aston, dated 21 October 1991, offered a somewhat more positive acceptance of the Bountiful site.

<sup>8</sup> Warren P. and Michaela Knoth Aston, "The Place Which Was Called Nahom: The Validation of an Ancient Reference to Southern Arabia" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991), and "And We Called the Place Bountiful: The End of Lehi's Arabian Journey" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991).

derived from accounts of the period of travel taken on the ancient incense routes. Nephi's comment that the women of the group "began to bear their journeyings without murmurings" (1 Nephi 17:2) could be read as implying that a substantial period was involved in this last stage of the journey rather than just a month or so. On page 34 the Hiltons feature a small map of Lehi's journey; however, the map misplaces Nahom and shows the path of the expedition gracefully arching down to Salalah instead of in the "nearly eastward" direction Nephi describes.

Even earlier in the book, page 15 reproduces a map showing a zigzag course from the west coast to the east coast of Arabia before continuing along the coast up to Salalah. The southern portion of this map bears little resemblance to recognized trade routes and the coastal section ending at Salalah is geographically impossible. Such a route could not have been described by Nephi as "nearly eastward" and would have had the Lehites arriving first on the Hadhramaut coast and then wending their way along the coastline for hundreds of miles northeast to Dhofar (incidentally bypassing the most fertile spot at Khor Kharfot!). It is misleading and confusing to label this map as depicting a route "just as described in the Book of Mormon." The map on page 133, showing in more detail the Hiltons' proposed routing to Bountiful/Salalah, is little better than the other maps just discussed and suggests Lehi followed a circuitous inland route from Nahom east to Shabwah, northeast for quite some distance, east again to the highly contested site of "Ubar," and finally southeast to Salalah.

Suffice it to say that those who prefer to take Nephi at his word and accept that travel after Nahom was "nearly eastward," as scripture records, will find that a completely feasible straight-line route from Nahom, deviating less than half a degree from true east, will arrive at the only candidate in Arabia that matches the scriptural criteria, Khor Kharfot.<sup>9</sup>

The Hiltons devote their final chapter to an analysis of what Nephi might have meant when he gave the direction of travel after Nahom as "nearly eastward," suggesting that he might have

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<sup>9</sup> Warren P. and Michaela Knoth Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), contains the scriptural profile of the Old World Bountiful (pp. 27-9), followed by an analysis, based on ground surveys, of each possible site on the Arabian coastline (pp. 37-59).



meant not just the route to Bountiful but also the sea journey across two thirds of the globe to the New World. While it is true that the projected landing place in Mesoamerica accepted by most Book of Mormon scholars is close in latitude to Nahom and Bountiful, even a cursory glance at an atlas will show that the sea voyage could not possibly have maintained a “nearly eastward” direction. The need to avoid the Indian subcontinent and to negotiate the island groups north of Australia alone obviously required numerous and substantial deviations.

In addition, the only feasible method for an unpowered easterly Pacific crossing would have required the assistance of the periodic equatorial countercurrent, thus resulting in a latitudinal deviation from Nahom to the land of first inheritance roughly equivalent to the entire journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful. In light of these geographical realities, therefore, it is difficult to read 1 Nephi 17:1 as referring to anything other than the land journey from Nahom to Bountiful as described in the text.

Throughout the book, the present-day location of Bountiful is usually given as “Dhofar.” But this choice of nomenclature is ultimately quite misleading. While it is true that the only site meeting all of Nephi’s very precise criteria for Bountiful, Khor Kharfot, is technically in the southern province of Dhofar, it is part of a distinct and entirely different geological region, being backed by the Qamar mountain range rather than the Qara hills behind Salalah. The two sites have little more than an arbitrary political description in common. The Hiltons, who have never visited any of the other possible sites for Bountiful in either Yemen or Oman, nowhere attempt a comprehensive analysis of what Nephi actually says about Bountiful. When one does so the shortcomings of Salalah as a candidate become rapidly apparent.

While the Hiltons’ book is correct in its general thrust and in its insistence on the literal historicity of the Book of Mormon, it is unfortunate that, with regard to Bountiful in particular, they have chosen to disregard a whole body of information that would have greatly strengthened their case and increased the value of their book to the average Latter-day Saint. As of 1992, the entire east coast of the Arabian peninsula has been ground-surveyed from a Latter-day Saint perspective, an essential prerequisite to settling the question of Bountiful’s present-day location, and the need no

longer exists to rely solely on historical accounts or theories as the Hiltons do in this book. In the process of making their own case, the Hiltons, in both the text and illustrations, have somewhat obscured the simple geographical truths that should have been plain and irresistibly appealing to the reader.

As we approach the new millennium, Latter-day Saints can now point with confidence to the first eighteen chapters of the Book of Mormon as being verifiable and rooted in a historical reality that no critic can dismiss.<sup>10</sup> The place called Nahom, it now seems, is still there today, and the derision directed in the past, even quite recently, at the concept of a fertile “Bountiful” has vanished. Furthermore, this unique place is in precisely the directional relationship to Nahom required by the text. The deafening silence from the critics that has greeted all the published work to date concerning Lehi’s journey is significant.

Despite the book’s flaws and the Hiltons’ tendency to see correspondences in virtually everything they have encountered, they have mostly avoided overstating their claims for evidence in Arabia supporting the reality of Lehi’s journey. Rarely do they appeal to testimony or impressions, and then only as confirmation of what they see as physical evidence. Certainly nothing in this book approaches the logical and geographical absurdities contained in some recent books claiming to deal with this area of Book of Mormon studies, including assertions that Lehi traveled not only across Arabia, but across India and southeast Asia to a Bountiful in either Macau or Hong Kong harbor,<sup>11</sup> or—worse still—that the actual outline of Nephi’s ship can still be seen and even photographed on the shores of Bountiful.<sup>12</sup>

Although I ultimately find their theories regarding the Lehyanites and the origin of Lamanite skin color unconvincing and their continued (albeit often ambiguous) support for a Salalah Bountiful frustrating, the book has the merit of much original

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<sup>10</sup> To date I am unaware of any substantive criticism regarding any of the data presented in the book *In the Footsteps of Lehi*.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene L. Peay, *The Lands of Zarahemla: A Book of Mormon Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Northwest, 1993), 38–46.

<sup>12</sup> Scot F. and Maurine J. Proctor, *Light from the Dust: A Photographic Exploration into the Ancient World of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 54–5.

thought based on more than armchair research. Read with caution and in conjunction with other published research, the book well deserves a place in the scanty Latter-day Saint literature dealing with this area. The Hiltons' writing is at its best and most valuable when discussing the early stages of the Lehite desert odyssey, and it still represents the only significant commentary on the long journey down the east coast of the Red Sea. Until more fieldwork is undertaken in Arabia that will remain the case.

The book *Discovering Lehi* is the result of twenty years of research. Lynn and Hope Hilton's continued efforts are a needed reminder that Latter-day Saints have much work still ahead to mine the wealth of insight, enlightenment, and confirming evidence awaiting us in the well-preserved Old World setting where the Book of Mormon story begins.