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CHAPTER 14

LEHI'S ARABIAN JOURNEY UPDATED

Noel B. Reynolds

We can be certain that Joseph Smith knew almost nothing of the Arabian peninsula, and that what he might possibly have heard would have led him astray had he tried to imagine a journey of Israelite refugees through its foreboding wastes. Yet the Book of Mormon confidently describes an orderly exodus, directions of travel, stages of travel and rest, significant landmarks and turning points, and access to food sources and materials for ship building.¹ Joseph could not possibly have concocted such a detailed account that would fit the realities of the Arabian peninsula as it is now known. Nephi's account appears in every way to have been written by someone who had personal knowledge of that area.

Work done principally by Warren and Michaela Aston has added greatly to our appreciation of the accuracy of significant details in Nephi's account.² Largely due to their

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efforts, we have reasonable confidence that we now know the general area of Nahom and Ishmael's burial and the specific site of Bountiful, where the ship was built. More recent investigations in Oman further confirm the Bountiful location.

The Place Which Was Called Nahom

Lehi and his party, like other nomads of the Arabian peninsula, often named the places they visited in their travels, particularly their long-term campsites. Some places had already been named, of course, like Jerusalem and the Red Sea, but other places did not have universally recognized names. Lehi named a river after Laman and a valley after Lemuel, and when they finally arrived at the seashore, he named the spot Bountiful for its "much fruit" and the sea Irreantum, or "many waters" (1 Nephi 17:5). But Ishmael was buried "in the place *which was called* Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:34), suggesting that the location had already been named.

In a 1978 letter to the *Ensign*,³ Ross Christensen proposed that Nehem, a locality twenty-five miles northeast of Sana'a in Yemen, according to a two-century-old German surveyor's map, be more carefully considered as the possible location of Nephi's Nahom. The Semitic name *NHM* occurs in Arabic and Hebrew texts as *Nahum*, *Naham*, *Nihm*, *Nehem*, and *Nahm*. Its roots indicate mourning, consoling, and complaining from hunger. The name fits perfectly the events that Nephi associates with Nahom:

The daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly, because of the loss of their father, and because of their afflictions in the wilderness; and they did murmur against my father, . . . saying: Our father is dead; yea, and we have wandered much in the wilderness, and we have suffered

much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue; and after all these sufferings we must perish in the wilderness with hunger. (1 Nephi 16:35)

Warren Aston has shown that the name *NHM* can be associated with this same area as early as the first century A.D. Because this area features an ancient burial ground that was actively used between 3000 B.C. and A.D. 1000 and is removed from places of settlement, it is not now known whether it was named for the Nihm tribe that has occupied the general area for centuries or whether the tribe took its name from the locality. What is known, however, is that the place name is unique in all the Middle East. Consistent with this understanding of Nehem as a traditional burial ground, Nephi states that Ishmael was buried in Nahom, not that he died there.

Lehi's party arrived in Nahom by traveling in "nearly a south-southeast direction" (1 Nephi 16:13). After burying Ishmael at Nahom they turned "nearly eastward" (1 Nephi 17:1) into the high desert, traveling through the harsh wilderness until they arrived at the coast at a fertile location they named Bountiful. Nibley and others note that this simple travel account fits well with what is now known of the ancient trade routes that carried frankincense from Oman and Yemen northward to the Mediterranean markets. These routes followed water holes through inland valleys that paralleled the east shore of the Red Sea. The Astons argue persuasively that while Lehi and his party traveled in the same direction as these ancient trade routes, they likely did not follow the most direct and efficient route, but were led "in the more fertile parts of the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:16), out of the main traffic, taking years to traverse what could have been covered in months. Because of the geography, all southward routes ultimately led to the Jawf valley, only a

few miles from Nehem, and from there travelers could go directly south to what is now Sana'a, the modern capital of Yemen, or strike eastward toward the frankincense-rich Hadhramaut region of eastern Yemen. But soon after Wadi Jawf, the ancient frankincense trails also veered south. No wonder the Book of Mormon descriptions of travel from that point on emphasize the difficulties of travel in the wilderness as Lehi's party follows the directions of the Liahona "nearly eastward" off the beaten track through the borders of the Empty Quarter. While no one in Joseph Smith's 1829 community would have understood this history or geography, Nephi's account in the Book of Mormon presents a complexity of details that could only have been written by one who had personally traveled the area.

Nephi's Bountiful

Although Nephi's account does not give the exact location of Bountiful, it contains numerous details that can help locate it on a modern map. The Astons have developed an exhaustive list of factual implications from the text that can, mainly by process of elimination, help locate the sites that might fit Nephi's description of Bountiful. A slightly modified version of their twelve textual criteria for Bountiful follows:

1. If Nehem is the same as Nephi's Nahom, then Bountiful, which is "nearly eastward" of Nahom, must also be close to the 16th degree north latitude.
2. The coastal location must be accessible from the interior desert.
3. The coastal site and its general environs must be fertile and capable of producing fruits and other crops.

4. The coastal site must be suitable for a long-term camp (probably at least three years) and for the construction and launching of a sizable ship.
5. Timber of a size and quality suitable for a substantial ocean-crossing vessel must be readily available.
6. Fresh water must be available year-round.
7. There must be a nearby prominence that Nephi referred to as “the mount” (1 Nephi 18:3) and “the mountain” (1 Nephi 17:7), where he often went to pray.
8. There must be a dangerous cliff where Nephi’s brothers could attempt to kill him by throwing him into the sea.
9. Ore for tools, preferably iron, must be available close enough to the site that the Lord could show Nephi where to find it.
10. There must be flint available that Nephi could use to start a fire.
11. It is not likely that Bountiful was inhabited (c. 590 B.C.), for there is no mention of social interaction or of market transactions for tools, supplies, etc.
12. There must be suitable winds and currents for sailing.

The Astons have helped this investigation enormously by visiting every site on the southern coast of the Arabian peninsula that might possibly have been Nephi’s Bountiful. Contrary to the theories of earlier investigators, they have shown that Salalah and other proposed sites do not fulfill the full criteria for Bountiful. Instead, they have discovered an obscure site, little known to people even in Oman, that seems to easily and convincingly meet all the criteria for Bountiful.

Khor Kharfot (Fort Inlet or Port) lies near the extreme western end of Oman's Dhofar coast and at the mouth of the short and rugged Wadi Sayq (River Valley). Though it is a small area and incapable of supporting much of a population, there is clear evidence that it has been inhabited in the past. The ruins of a small Islamic-period village are evident, and much older and even smaller ruins may date to the first or second millennium B.C. An irrigation system is still visible, and may have brought fresh water from further up the wadi to the walled fields nearer the beach and village.

While none of the other candidate sites meet more than half the requirements for Bountiful, Khor Karfot seems to meet them all:

1. Situated less than one degree from due east of Nehem (Nahom), Khor Kharfot easily meets Nephi's statement that it was "nearly eastward."
2. Wadi Sayq, which leads from the interior to the ocean, is the only wadi system on this coastline that flows from the high desert plateau eastward toward the coast. All others flow from north to south. A caravan could reach the coast from the interior either by traveling through the bottom of the wadi itself or by following the flat-topped ridge on the south side of the wadi to its abrupt end above the seashore. Descending from that point to the beach would be feasible but difficult.
3. Khor Kharfot is the most fertile of the naturally fertile sites on the southern coast, and this fertility would be noticed by travelers from the interior as far as two miles inland from the beach. The seasonal monsoon rains that cause this fertility stack up on the beach against the coastal mountains and penetrate only a short distance

up the wadi valleys. A vegetation boundary is visible on the sides of the wadi where these rains reach each year.

4. Khor Kharfot's suitability for a long-term encampment and for launching a ship is apparent in the clear evidence that it was used as a small seaport during the Islamic period. Climatic change has since dried up the river, allowing the beach to close off the small port completely. Fresh water from springs still accumulates behind the beach in a pond, which is all that now remains of the earlier port facility.
5. Anciently, this part of Oman was heavily forested, and numerous sizable trees exist at Khor Kharfot. Remains of significant trees from recent centuries are still visible on the plateau above, although goats and drought have long since eliminated the ancient forests. These forests provided the ancient Omani with lumber to build the fleets of sewn boats that earned them recognition as the Phoenicians of the Indian Ocean. Using these vessels, the Omani have maintained trade between Mesopotamia, Africa, India, and even China over most of a five thousand-year period.
6. Although the gradual desiccation of the Arabian peninsula over the last two or three millennia has caused most of the local springs to also dry up, Khor Kharfot still enjoys the largest permanent flow of fresh water of any site on this coastline. In addition, there is extensive evidence that many springs, now dry, once existed all around the base of the cliffs surrounding the site. Part of an enormous limestone formation, these mountains have yielded a small but steady supply of water over the centuries.

7. When viewed from the east end of the beach, the mountain terminus of the plateau stands like a large domed mountain overlooking the west end of the beach, meeting quite easily Nephi's description of a mountain or mount where he retired for prayer.
8. This same mount rises out of the sea with several two hundred-foot cliffs. The earliest ruins indicate that at least one small pre-Christian group actually lived within a few yards of these cliffs. During high tide the waves smash viciously against the cliffs and rocks below, making a most suitable place for murderously minded men to dispose of an annoying brother.
9. The text does not specify whether Nephi used copper or iron for his tools, but only ore. The enormous copper deposits of Oman have been exploited for millennia and are noted in records dating to the time of Abraham as the source of copper sold in Ebla (Syria). However, the ancient copper mines are in the northern half of Oman, some distance from Dhofar.

Iron would make far better tools for woodworking, but ancient iron mining is not documented in this region. Nephi may have needed as much as fifty to one hundred pounds of iron to make tools for his crew. Specular hematite is the form of iron most commonly used in primitive smelting procedures, and stores of specular hematite have been reported on the Mirbat plain, just a few days' hike to the east of Khor Kharfot. Recent geological surveys show that this and other forms of iron ore were available even closer to the site,⁴ making Nephi's account of being shown by the Lord where to find ore perfectly plausible in Khor Kharfot.

10. Chert, a form of flint that can be struck together to start a fire, is available on the surface in enormous quantities throughout the larger Wadi Sayq region.
11. The evidence that the Khor Kharfot area was occupied at least intermittently is clear. Preliminary surveys indicate that the peak population must have been reached during the Islamic period when it was a prospering port, but just as it is currently uninhabited, the area may well have been unoccupied through much of the past. It was far from other population centers and only reasonably accessible by sea. While some natural defense features exist in Khor Kharfot, any small population would have been extremely vulnerable to marauding pirates. The area simply is not large enough to support a large number of fighting men.
12. This coast of the Indian Ocean is most well-suited to sailing. Winds are seasonal but invite fall sailing to the east. While it would have been impossible for Joseph Smith or his contemporaries to know that southern Arabia was home to mariners and shipbuilders, we now realize that the ancient Omani were world leaders in these professions for millennia.

Conclusions

Critics of the Book of Mormon who believe that Joseph Smith or a contemporary author created the story of Lehi out of his own imagination have much to explain: How did Joseph Smith know that Lehi's party had to follow an inland route to reach southern Arabia? How did he know that the direction should shift from south by southeast to east at a place bearing the Semitic name *NHM*? How did he know

that this was the appropriate place for the burial of an important person like Ishmael? How did he know that a group traveling due east from *NHM* would meet the sea at a uniquely fertile and hospitable spot that was suitable for building and launching a ship? How did he know that Oman had ample resources for ship building and sailing, and that there were mountains and cliffs on the sea shore itself?

These important details run directly counter to all knowledge of Arabia in Joseph Smith's day and to most popular belief about Arabia even today. The simplest and most reasonable explanation is that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries did not know these things; they truthfully said that the account was written by Nephi, who had experienced these things firsthand, and was given to Joseph Smith by divine intervention. Those who exclude this explanation a priori must explain a great deal in order to account for this 1830 text. Every serious effort to understand the geography of Nephi's account of his wilderness travels reveals its complexity and accuracy in describing the real world. The geographical account, often thought fantastic, must be seen as a powerful witness of the Book of Mormon's divine origins and ancient authorship.

Notes

1. See Eugene England, "Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?" in *Book of Mormon Authorship*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982, republished by FARMS in 1996), 143–56, for a full account of this argument.

2. Much of this chapter draws on Warren and Michaela Aston's technical reports in their FARMS papers, "The Place Which Was Called Nahom" (Provo, Ut.: FARMS, 1991) and "And We Called the Place Bountiful" (Provo, Ut.: FARMS, 1991), and draws espe-

cially on their beautifully illustrated book, which gives a larger overview and more personal experience (see 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]).

3. Ross T. Christensen, "Comment," *Ensign* (August 1978): 73.

4. See the preliminary report of Eugene Clark's 1995 FARMS-sponsored mineralogical survey of the Dhofar region, "A Preliminary Survey of the Geology and Mineral Resources of Dhofar, the Sultanate of Oman," (Provo, Ut.: FARMS, 1995).