

## The Truth about Book of Mormon Archaeology: Part Three, Lehi's Trail



The major attributes of Lehi's journey in the wilderness are well known among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I spent five years traveling the Bedu trails of Arabia proving that each of these attributes actually existed in Lehi's time.

- 1. Wilderness and Way of the Wilderness.** Nephi recorded that his father departed Jerusalem and went "into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 2:4). Lehi was warned by the Lord to leave Jerusalem, for his life was in danger (1 Nephi 1:20; 2:2). The urgency of the situation is manifested by the fact that Lehi left behind his gold, silver, and precious things (1 Nephi 1:4). The prophet knew Jerusalem would be destroyed and was taking his family into Arabia. The fastest route would have been "into the wilderness" to the main caravan route, the Frankincense trail. They would reach the trail near Amman,

Jordan. The recent discovery of the remains of a church at Wadi el-Kharrar, marking the place where John the Baptist ministered, would suggest that the area to the east of Jerusalem, beyond the Jericho plain, was, in fact, “the wilderness” Nephi referred to and that the family was headed to the Frankincense trail. The scriptures say that John the Baptist was “preaching in the wilderness of Judea” (Matt. 3:1). Since Lehi took with him his tents (1 Nephi 2:4), he would have needed camels to carry those heavy items into Arabia. Since camels need level terrain, it only makes sense that he would have followed the camel route known as the Frankincense trail that avoids the mountains. Indeed, the section of the Frankincense trail that leads from Amman south to Arabia was known in antiquity as the “Way of the Wilderness” (2 Sam. 15:23-28).

- 2. Valley of Lemuel with its river of continually running water.** It is commonly accepted that the Valley of Lemuel is found along the Arabian side of the Red Sea. The Book of Mormon claims that a river of continually running water exists in the valley (1 Nephi 2:6,9). However, as I began my research it was believed that no such rivers existed in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Agriculture and Water, with the assistance of the U.S. Geological Survey (U.S.G.S.) spent forty-four years surveying the kingdom’s water resources. Their study consisted of seismic readings, surface and aerial surveys, and land satellite photo analysis. They concluded that “Saudi Arabia may be the world’s largest country without any perennial rivers or streams.”<sup>1</sup> It is a compelling evidence of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon that Craig Thorsted and I found in Saudi Arabia a majestic valley that includes a perennial desert river in Saudi Arabia, and that it is located exactly where the Book of Mormon says it is located. Indeed we used Nephi instructions to reach the river, which we have photographed and videoed, and which dozens of people have visited since our original discovery in 1995.<sup>2</sup> The name of the valley is wadi Tayyib al-Isim, meaning valley of the good name.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Waters, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Water Atlas of Saudi Arabia*, xv.

<sup>2</sup> George Potter & Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort inc, 2003), 25-28, and George Potter and Timothy Sedor, documentary film, *Discovering Lehi’s Trail*, Part 1. Discovering the Valley of Lemuel, [www.nephiproject.com](http://www.nephiproject.com)).

## Valley of Lemuel & River of Laman

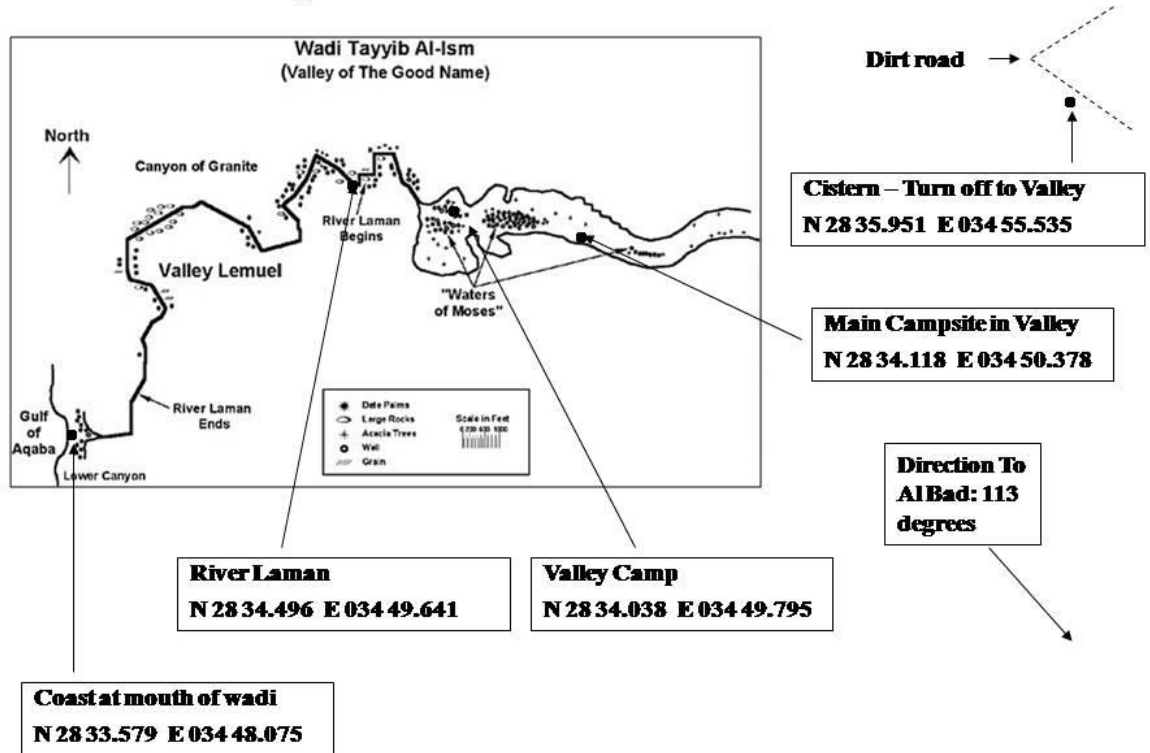


Figure 1 Map of Wadi Tayyib al-Isim with GPS Coordinates.

3. **Shazer.** When Lehi left the Valley of Lemuel, his party traveled south-southeast for 4-days before pitching their tents in a place called Shazer. The family stopped at Shazer to hunt for meat before proceeding deeper into the desert. (1 Neph1 16:13-14). Traveling in Arabia would have required that Lehi take the Frankincense trail and to camp only at well sites where local tribes maintained forts called *Kellas*.<sup>3</sup> Michael Bellersen, Timothy Evan, and Satya Nand drove the equivalence of a 4-days camel ride south-southeast from the wadi Tayyib al-Isim. The entire course was through a barren and rocky plain until we reached the Frankincense halt that was known in older times as *Segir*.<sup>4</sup> From the fort (*kella*) at Segir a 5-mile long valley of trees runs from the mountains all the way to the Red Sea. Regarding Shazer, Hugh Nibley wrote, "The name is intriguing. The Combination *shajer* is quite common in Palestine place names; it is a collective meaning

<sup>3</sup> George Potter & Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 61-69.

<sup>4</sup> The map *Egyptus*, which shows the names of the halts along the ancient trail, copy in possession of the author.

'trees,' and many Arabs (especially in Egypt it pronounce it Shazer.<sup>5</sup>) According to Nigel Groom, author of the *Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames* writes that *Shajer* means, "A valley or area abounding with trees and shrubs."<sup>6</sup> Nibley further explains that in 600 BC Shazer would have been pronounced *Segor*. There are maps that still show both the present and older spelling for Shazer. Vowels are not written in Arabic, and are somewhat interchangeable when written in Latin characters. Thus, the name *Segir* or *Segor* would both be spell on Arabic maps as "Sgr." Therefore, the Book of Mormon appears to contain an actual placename of a small and remote camp along the Frankincense trail which has been abandon for hundreds of years, yet it lies exactly where the Book of Mormon claims it should be found. Further, we were told by the General of the Police in that area of Saudi Arabia, that the mountains adjacent to the well at *Segir* (Shazer) has the best hunting in all of northwest Arabia. Thus, the Book of Mormon even provides the purpose of why Lehi decided to pitch his tents and hunt for meat.

- 4. Most Fertile Parts and the Lihyanites:** Leaving Shazer, Lehi's family traveled in the same direction to an area Nephi referred to as the most fertile parts of the wilderness that were in the borders (1 Nephi 16:14). I learned from the Arabs that the name of the mountains in northwest Arabia, the *Hejaz*, means the "borders." In the Semitic language, the words for mountain and borders share a common derivation. That is, the Hebrew word *gebul* means borders. *Gebul* cognates with Arabic *jabal* (*jebel*, *djebel*), which means mountains.<sup>7</sup> Nephi is telling us that in the next segment of their journey they were traveling through mountains and through this area there were "fertile parts." Fertile lands and the hellish deserts of Arabia appear to be an oxymoron, especially to someone with Joseph Smith, Jr.'s extremely limited knowledge of a land called Arabia. However, this is another remarkable witness to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. From *Segir*, the Frankincense trail weaves its way south-southeast through the Hejaz mountains to what is today the city of Medinah. According to the Saudi Arabian Department of Antiquities and Museums, the central part of this segment was called *Hajar* (*Hijr*) since at least the time of Ramses II, 1290-1124 BC<sup>8</sup> The related word *ajar*

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, Ed. John W. Welch. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 78-79.

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Groom, *Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames*, s.v. "shajir" (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, London: Longman, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous F.A.R.M.S. (Neil Maxwell Institute, BYU) review notes to the author, July 1998. The author of this critique of George's early work noted, "But the Hebrew word is used of non-mountainous areas as well, though its origin may have been in reference to mountain barriers." Also reviewer's notes from F.A.R.M.S./BYU to authors, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Education Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Antiquities Sites of al-Ula and Madain Saleh*, (Riyadh: Ministry of Education Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, no date, 26.

simply means the “farms.”<sup>9</sup> Groom’s *Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames* provides the alternate spellings and names for *Hajar*, namely *Hijra*, *Mahajar*, *Mahijra*, *Muhajar*, and *Muhjir*, which means, among other things, “a fertile piece of land.”<sup>10</sup> Since the words “piece” and “part” are synonyms, *Hajar* could also be translated “a fertile part of land.” Even more interesting is that the prophet Mohammed referred to the villages along this part of the Frankincense trail as the *Muhajirun*, which means “the fertile parts of land,” the exact words used by Nephi in describing this part of their journey. It is along this segment of the trail that Nephi probably served part of his mission in the wilderness (D&C 33-8). Lynn and Hope Hilton were the first to associate the ancient Lihyan (meaning people of “Lihy”) with Nephi’s mission.<sup>11</sup> The people of Lihy rule from their capital in the valley of Ula since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>12</sup> The Biblical town of Dedan was the most important Frankincense halt in northern Arabia. The Lihyanites were originally named the Dedanites after the Grandson of Abraham; however, they changed their name to the People of Lihy around 550 BC, shortly after Lehi and his family would have been traveling down the Frankincense Trail. The Hiltons measured what appears to be a baptismal font that is buried in the foundations of the Lihyan temple and found that it had dimensions nearly identical to the brazen sea font of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> The Book of Mormon’s description of this segment of the trail is remarkable. The sacred book was published in 1830, and no Westerner had visited this part of the Frankincense trail until 1876.<sup>14</sup>

5. **The Frankincense Trail.** Without a source of water and supplies, Lehi could not have traveled in Arabia. The only know river of flowing water in Saudi Arabia is the one found in wadi Tayyib al-Ism, our candidate for the Valley of Lemuel. Otherwise, Lehi had to travel along a trail where wells had been dug and maintained. The only trail with maintained wells that existed down Arabia in the sixth century BC was the inland trading route known as the Frankincense trail. The trail is mentioned in the Old Testament (Ezek. 27:20,22) and followed the western edge of the Basalt Aquifer. Although some uninformed authors have suggested that Lehi traveled along the coast, there was no trail along the Arabian side of Red Sea shoreline until the ninth century AD.<sup>15</sup> The inland Frankincense route followed in a south-southeast direction (1 Nephi 16:13, 14, 33) down the eastern side of the Hejaz and Asir mountains of western Arabia. When the

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Catafago, *Arabic and English Literary Dictionary*, (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1975), 652.

<sup>10</sup> Groom, *Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames*, s.v. “hajar.”

<sup>11</sup> Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi*, (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort Inc., 1996), 75-99

<sup>12</sup> Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi*, 96-99.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Education Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Antiquities Sites*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Abdullah Saud Al-Saud, “Domestication of Camels and Inland Trading Routes in Arabia,” *Atltl, the Journal of Saudi Arabian Archeology*, 14 (1996), 131,132.

trail reached what is today Yemen in southwest Arabia, the trail turned east (1 Nephi 17:1) until it reached the land of the Frankincense trees. No westerner had traveled the Frankincense trail when the Book of Mormon was published, yet the sacred book describes the exact course of the trail. Even more amazing is that the Book of Mormon accurately describes the terrain<sup>16</sup> and agricultural fertility<sup>17</sup> of the lands along the course of the trail.

6. **Source of Bow Wood.** Nephi broke his metal bow in an area where there was no food to be found along the trail, so the family suffered from hunger (1 Nephi 16:17-32). Nephi had to fabricate a wooden bow and climb into the mountains to hunt. While bow wood is scarce in Arabia, Neil Holland of New Zealand, consulted with tribal leaders in southern Arabia and discovered that they made excellent bows from the *Atim* tree (wild olive),<sup>18</sup> found in a small range in the mountains above a segment of the Frankincense trail in southern Arabia. Along this section of the trail there is only one cultivated oasis on the average of every 160 miles. The mountain just to the east of the trail in this part of Arabia is the home of several species of both large and small game animals.
  
7. **Place called Nahom.** After 1,400 miles of traveling approximately south-southeast, the family reached a place called Nahom (1 Nephi 16:34). In 1978 Ross T. Christensen published a brief article pointing out that in Yemen a community named “Nahom” existed 18 miles northeast of the modern capital San’a.<sup>19</sup> In fact, there are several places named “NHM (more common variants spellings are Naham, Nahm, Nehem, Nehhm, Nihm) in the area where Nephi indicated that the family turned east to where he built his ship. The Frankincense trail turned east in northern Yemen. In Arabic, vowels are not written down. The name NHM is associated with a mountain called Jabal Naham in Yemen. Our studies have revealed that the name NHM also exists elsewhere in Yemen. Wadi Naham (also called wadi Narib Naham) is found just south of wadi Jizel close to the ancient trail between Main and Marib. Furdath Naham, meaning “stony hills of Naham,” is marked on the U.S. CIA map of Yemen of 1970 and is itself only a few miles from the same road.<sup>20</sup> While excavating the Bar’an temple in Marib, a German archaeological team under the leadership of Burkhard Vogt unearthed a stone altar bearing the inscription of the name of the benefactor who donated it, “Bi’athar, son of Sawad, from the tribe of Naw’, from Nihm.” Vogt dates the altar to the seventh or sixth

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<sup>16</sup> Potter, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 61,60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 80-83.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 98-105.

<sup>19</sup> Ross T. Christensen, “The Place Called Nahom,” *Ensign* 8 (August 1978) 73.

<sup>20</sup> Potter, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 113.

century BC<sup>21</sup> In September 2000, a second altar bearing the name “Nah’m” was found in Marib in the Temple of the Moon Goddess, which dated to the “seventh or eighth century BC”<sup>22</sup>

8. **The land Bountiful.** If the Book of Mormon is true, we should be able to travel from Nahom east on the Frankincense trail and come to an amazing garden land in the mist of the great Arabian desert. Hugh Nibley, and later the Hiltons, directed students of the Book of Mormon to the Salalah Coast plain where the Frankincense trail terminated. The plain is due east of Nahom and has the three primary characteristics Nephi attributes to the land he called Bountiful: a shoreline, abundant fruit, and wild honey. Bountiful had “much fruit” and much fruits. The soil of the coastal plain is remarkably rich and productive. Numerous springs, fed by the summer monsoons, irrigate the plain, and the area is said to be capable of producing three crops in a year.<sup>23</sup> Present-day farms on the coast grow coconuts, bananas, sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, indigo, cereals, pulse, and vegetables. However, many of these crops are modern introductions. There is evidence that the ‘Adites, who occupied the Salalah plain in Nephi’s time were highly adept at agriculture. Pre-Islamic traditions and the Qur’an cite that the ‘Adites built magnificent cities above where rivers flow.<sup>24</sup> According to the Qur’an, the People of ‘Ad built a “landmark on every high place” (26:134) and had gardens and springs (26:134) and irrigated fields (46:21).<sup>25</sup> The chronicler Wahb idn Munaabbih recorded the oral tradition of the prophet Hud who, according to the Qur’an, lived in Old Testament times. In this tale “the trees of the tribe of ‘Ad became green and brought forth fruit out of season”<sup>26</sup> at the conception of the prophet. Remarkable new discoveries at the very site where the trail ended, the natural harbor at Khor Rori near the eastern end of the Salalah Coastal plain, are extremely interesting. In the harbor, shipping existed at the time of Nephi, and the building of a ship was the reason the family traveled all the way to southern Arabia. The harbor settlement and its adjacent village of Taqah (two miles to the west) were occupied during Lehi’s time.<sup>27</sup> The remains of stone fences

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<sup>21</sup> S. Kent Brown, “Place That Was Called Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1991), 66-68.

<sup>22</sup> Lynn Hilton, personal communications with author, July 2000. Date of the Temple given by Professor Yusuf M. Abdulla, President of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, General organization of Antiquities, Museums and Manuscripts, Sana’a, Yemen.

<sup>23</sup> S.b. Miles, *Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf*, (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1966), 515.

<sup>24</sup> Hamblin, “Pre-Islamic Arabian Prophets,” in *Mormons and Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer, (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1983), 96.

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, New ed. (Brentwood, MD: Amana Publications, 1994). 923, 924, 1309n 4799.

<sup>26</sup> *Tales of the Prophets of al Kisa’l*, 109-10.

<sup>27</sup> Juris Zarins, *The Land of incense, Archaeology and Cultural heritage Series*, vol. 1, Archaeological Work in the Governorate of Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman 1990-1995. The Project of the National Committee for the supervision

constructed for irrigation at the Khor, together with pollen samples from inside the buildings at Khor Rori, indicate that the people at the harbor cultivated fields and gardens of wheat (*Triticum* group), barley (*Hordeum* group), and date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*).<sup>28</sup> Further, Sorghum (Sorghum bi-color), millets (Eleusine sp., Pennisetum sp.), cotton (Gossypium sp.), and indigo Indigofera sp.) were cultivated in Salalah possible as early as 4000 BC.<sup>29</sup> It must be remembered that when Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, the meaning of “fruit” meant any cultivated plants, wheat, rye, oats, grasses, cotton, and flax.<sup>30</sup> Local Salalah historian Ali Al-Shahri (who has made a presentation at BYU and who was raised in the valley above Khor Rori) pointed out to us where, during his youth, a man came to the valley to collect wild honey.

9. **Nephi’s Harbor.** Undoubtedly the reason the Lord led Lehi’s party the length and width of Arabia was to build a ship to take the family to their final destination. When Irish maritime archaeologist Tim Severin built his replica ship the *Sohar*, a 52-foot replica of Sinbad’s Omani ship, he wrote, “It required a place to build her, a port to fit her out, and a large crew to sail her.” Severin was already an experienced transoceanic sailor. Thus, Nephi’s ship required one additional item, an experienced captain to command her. The Khor Rori was the only known harbor that existed in southern Oman in Lehi’s time. It was involved in seafaring as early as the fifth-fourth millennia BC.<sup>31</sup> As seen on the next map, the harbor possessed all of the maritime resources Nephi needed to build his ship of exceedingly fine workmanship.

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of Archaeological Survey in the Sultanate, ministry of Information (Sultanate of Oman: Sultan Qaboos University Publications Al-Nahda Printing Press, 2001), 74, 88, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Mauro Cremaschi and Alessandro Perego, “Land Use and Settlement pattern in the Archaeological Sumhuram: An intensive survey at Khor Rori,” Sumhuram preliminary Report (Pisa: University of Pisa, 2006), 23, 27 making reference to M. Mariotti Lippi, “Indagini palinologiche nel site archeologico di Sumhuram (Khor Rori) in Dhofar (Oman),” *Primi risultati, Egitto e Vicino Oriente* (2002), 25, 145, 149. M. Mariotti Lippi, R. Becattini, and T. Gonnelli, “Archeopalinology at Sumhuram (Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman)” in *Archaeological Studies: Khor Rori Report 1*, ed. Avanzini (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, Pisa, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Zarins, *The Land of Incense*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1; a facsimile of Noah Webster’s Original 1828 Edition (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970), no page numbers, see “Fruit).

<sup>31</sup> Zarins, *The Land of Incense*, 64, 76, 154.