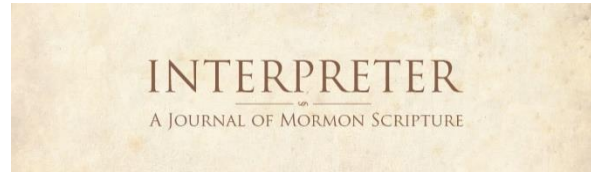




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## Nice Try, But No Cigar: A Response to Three Patheos Posts on Nahom (1 Nephi 16:34)

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# NICE TRY, BUT NO CIGAR: A RESPONSE TO THREE PATHEOS POSTS ON NAHOM (1 NEPHI 16:34)

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S. Kent Brown

*Abstract: A series of three Patheos posts on the subject of Nahom rings out-of-tune bells all over the place.*

Let's give credit where credit is due. The three pieces at the Patheos website written by an author known only as "RT" are well written and show an acquaintance with LDS sources that discuss the trek of Lehi and Sariah as recounted in the book of First Nephi in the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> That said, such an observation does not mean that gaping holes are not lacking in the basic research.

In the effort to place the narrative of First Nephi into the mythological or "imaginative history" sphere by saying that the narrative does not match what is known about ancient Arabian travel, RT does not see what all LDS researchers have come to see: that the well-established incense route that Lehi's party evidently followed ran on the east side of the Al-Sarāt mountains, not the western or coastal side. At least five passes are known from one side of the mountain range to the other.<sup>2</sup> Other, lesser-known tracks certainly also existed.

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1 "Nahom and Lehi's Journey through Arabia: A Historical Perspective, Part 1," *Faith Promoting Rumor* (blog), *Patheos*, 14 September 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/2015/09/nahom-and-lehis-journey-through-arabia-a-historical-perspective/>; "Nahom and Lehi's Journey through Arabia: A Historical Perspective, Part 2," *Faith Promoting Rumor* (blog), *Patheos*, 6 October 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/2015/10/nahom-and-lehis-journey-through-arabia-a-historical-perspective-part-2/>; "Nahom and Lehi's Journey through Arabia: A Historical Perspective, Part 3," *Faith Promoting Rumor* (blog), *Patheos*, 24 October 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/2015/10/nahom-and-lehis-journey-through-arabia-a-historical-perspective-part-3/>.

2 A. Grohmann and E. van Donzel, "al-Sarāt," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Brill Online, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, accessed 20 January 2016, <http://referenceworks>.

More important is the eastward turn of all southbound traffic in the region of Wadi Jawf. Joseph Smith could not have acquired that fact from any map produced before his era except one in London, in codex form. Only the map of Arabia Felix that accompanies the Codex Ebnerianus of Ptolemy's *Geography*, which was copied about AD 1460 and is now owned by the New York Public Library, shows a trail that turns east in south Arabia. This trail probably comes from the influence of Arab cartographers on the maker of the map because Ptolemy does not describe the trail in the written part of his work where he lists towns and their locations. This codex, which is not one of the more important copies of Ptolemy's work because it does not make Lister's list, came into the possession of the New York Public Library only in 1892 from a London book dealer named Bernard Quaritch and was not published until 1932.

Clearly, the eastward turn was known only to those who rode or walked the incense route in antiquity. This fact became known to modern researchers only after seeing the tremendous effort made by ancient caravaners to grade and level the incense road when it passed through mountainous terrain, such as the steep ascent out of Maktesh Ramon in southern Israel.

Further, no modern map of Arabia shows the belt of green vegetation in southern Oman that Nephi describes in his narrative as one possessing "much fruit," "wild honey" and "timbers" (1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1–2). This area of vegetation is exactly where the Book of Mormon narrative predicts it will be after the party turns eastward in the vicinity of Marib, Yemen.

The discussion about the Nihm/NHM/Nehhm/Nahom name has to be taken seriously. To be sure, the range of meanings of the root letters NHM in pre-exilic Hebrew are very different from those of ancient South Arabian. Why would they not be? But to suppose that the party of Lehi and Sariah would not sense relevance in the name when they heard it is to deny what happens anytime one is in a foreign-speaking environment. A person looks for cognates or similar sounding words and then links them to what he or she knows. It is a simple observation played out countless times when individuals step into an unfamiliar linguistic world.

The discussion of Joseph Smith's access to a modern map of Arabia that even slightly highlights the name Nihm/Nehhm is particularly questionable. To make up scenarios out of whole cloth is irresponsible.

The ideas were gathered from traveling salespeople? Neighbors? The notion that atlases were widely distributed into the population of New Hampshire or upstate New York is completely without basis.

What one wants most from the early nineteenth century environment of people who worked from first light in the day to last light in the evening is a specific reference, a reminiscence from a citizen of Lebanon or Palmyra, which says the Smith boys used to work on the farm for pay and, during their lunch break, used to look at the maps that were in the house. Specifically, the works of Jean Baptiste d’Anville and Carsten Niebuhr are not the types of items that the fellow who owned the blacksmith shop in Palmyra acquired. To suggest this requires more than supposition. Rather, such items belong in the homes of the well off. And people in those homes are not entertaining the local farm hands who work for hire, as Joseph and his siblings did.

Further, as the accession records at the Dartmouth University Library and Brown University’s John Hay Library show, the libraries of the day did not purchase such items even if they were available and even if they might be important for research and teaching on campus. The libraries acquired them from private donors, the wealthy. And no such people, who collected books, atlases, and the like, are known to have lived in Palmyra except for John H. Pratt, whose Manchester lending library catalogue does not include any hint in the collection about works that would lead a person into the world of Arabia.

The effort by RT to discredit as merely “apologetic” the works that seek to describe the environment through which the party of Lehi and Sariah journeyed fails. Does the very act of labeling all such efforts as “apologetic” mean that RT’s efforts should be classed as genuine historical research conducted without slightest hint of an agenda? Nice try, but no cigar.

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*A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU. His most recent book is The Testimony of Luke which deals historically, culturally, and doctrinally with each verse in Luke's Gospel and is available in hard copy and electronic-book form from BYU Studies, Deseret Book and Amazon. In Church service, he has served as president of the BYU Thirteenth Stake and president of the Jerusalem District. He is married to the former Gayle Oblad; they are the parents of five children and the grandparents of twenty-five grandchildren and one great grandchild.*