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Source: *Selections from the BYU Religious Education Student Symposium 2003*

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 2003

Page(s): 29-38

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## *Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Near East*

MICHAEL CLARK

In nineteenth-century America, not much was known about the Eastern world and its way of life. In fact, even the most educated citizens of the United States would not have been able to locate much information on Near Eastern geography, let alone Near Eastern customs and other characteristics of Semitic society. It would, then, be surprising if one were to find a book published in upstate New York from that time period that accurately described Near Eastern geography as well as a way of life that was only beginning to be discovered some 170 years later. The Book of Mormon is such a book. Translated in the late 1820s by Joseph Smith, this book preceded many of the archaeological and sociological discoveries of the last century and a half about Near Eastern society. It is necessary to note the background of the publishing of the Book of Mormon and the early life of its translator to show how this work has its origins from a source other than the imagination of one man's mind.

Joseph Smith was born in Vermont in 1805, and at the age of ten he moved with his family to Palmyra, New York. Joseph spent much of his childhood working on the family farm. With regard to his formal education, Elder Orson Pratt wrote: "His advantages, for acquiring literary knowledge, were exceedingly small; hence, his education was limited to a slight acquaintance with two or three of the common branches of learning. He could read without much difficulty, and write a very imperfect hand; and had a very limited understanding of the ground rules of arithmetic. These were his highest and only attainments; while the rest of those branches, so universally taught in the common schools throughout the United States, were entirely unknown to him."<sup>1</sup>

Despite his lack of education, the Prophet Joseph Smith was able to translate what is now 531 pages of the English language from the writings of the reformed Egyptian contained in the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. It is not the author's intent to prove the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith but to show convincing evidence contained within the Book of Mormon that supports the modern-day prophet. The Book of Mormon contains many aspects of Near Eastern society unknown to the Americas at the time of its publishing. It is highly improbable that such exact detail of this culture could have come from the uneducated mind, or educated mind, for that matter, of anyone in the early 1800s. As such, the geographical, cultural, and sociological foundations of the Book of Mormon text are compelling evidence that this nineteenth-century book could only have come through divine channels to Joseph Smith.

As has already been stated, Joseph Smith probably did not know anything concerning the geographical nature of the Near East throughout his entire life, including when he was translating the Book of Mormon. One of the interesting aspects concerning Book of Mormon geography is that of Lehi's journey from Jerusalem to the land of Bountiful as described in 1 Nephi. The Book of Mormon, with regard to Lehi's exodus from his homeland, mentions several common places found in that region, such as Jerusalem and the Red Sea, but it hasn't been until this last century that other geographical locations, once thought by Book of Mormon critics to be imaginary, have come to life in archaeological discoveries.

Among these archaeological sites is a place called Nahom, or Nahem as it is known today. 1 Nephi 16:34 reads, "And it came to pass that Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom." Part of the Near Eastern culture was the naming of newly encountered places by the one who found them.<sup>2</sup> For instance, when Lehi and his family set up camp early in their journey, Lehi proceeded to name the river and nearby valley after his two eldest sons. With Nahom, though, this is not the case. The Book of Mormon is very specific when it talks of "the place which was

called Nahom,” the name being already established, much like Jerusalem or the Red Sea. Lehi made no attempt to rename it. In recent years, this modern Nahem has come to light in the Arabian Peninsula right along the same course that was presumably taken by Lehi and his followers. As Daniel C. Peterson said,

They have found a place or located a place in the modern country of Yemen, right down there in South Eastern Arabia, which is called Nahem. And Nahem seems very like the ancient word Nahom, which appears in the Book of Mormon as the place where Ishmael was buried. . . . Anyone who knows anything about Arabic or Hebrew or ancient Semitic languages knows that it's the consonants that are important. The vowels can shift and change. So these names are virtually indistinguishable. And what does the root NHM mean? It can mean things like to cry out in grief, to sigh, to mourn, to console; it's a perfect name for an ancient graveyard. And it turns out that in this place Nahem, which is in exactly the right location, there is an ancient graveyard going back to we don't know how long ago, because archaeological excavations have not been permitted there yet and may never be. But in any event, there is an ancient graveyard there, and the place is in exactly the right position on that trail where it ought to be.<sup>3</sup>

It would have been impossible for Joseph Smith, or anyone in the Americas, to have known about an ancient graveyard called Nahom in southern Arabia. Nonetheless, Joseph didn't miss the mark when he dictated “the place . . . called Nahom” as Ishmael's burial place.

Nahom also became an important turning point for Lehi's group. From Nahom, the group traveled “nearly eastward from that time forth” (1 Nephi 17:1). From this part of the journey it was not long before the travelers reached the lush land of Bountiful. Traveling in the deserts of Arabia, one wouldn't expect to find a land of foliage at the shore of the sea, but that is exactly what this group did. “And we did come to the land which we called Bountiful, because of its much fruit and also wild honey. . . . And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, which, being interpreted, is many waters” (1 Nephi 17:5). Even today, when most of us think

of the Arab lands it is hard for us to picture anything other than vast, interminable deserts. Finding a place such as Nephi describes to us in this region seems highly unlikely.

In the 1970s, Lynn and Hope Hilton attempted to follow what they had determined to be Lehi's trail from Jerusalem to the land of Bountiful. Part of their findings included the fact that directly east of the possible site of Nahom is a land on the shore of the Arabian Sea that is rich with vegetation and spring waters. The Hiltons concurred with Nephi in his description of the landscape at this particular stopping point for Lehi's group. They said, "Nephi was not exaggerating when he called the land Bountiful because of its fruitfulness. It springs to life at the touch of water, and the local farmers assured us that they make ten cuttings of alfalfa a year. We saw a whole potential market of fruits growing—citrons, limes, oranges, dates, bananas, grapes, apricots, coconuts, figs, and melons—and a profusion of wild flowers."<sup>4</sup> As impossible as it seemed, places like a Book of Mormon Bountiful are found to exist along what is being speculated as the trail that Lehi and his family used. It is not only the occurrence of these sites that is remarkable but also the degree of accuracy with which Joseph Smith was able to describe these lands without ever having seen them firsthand.

Another dilemma for Joseph Smith was the criticized Book of Mormon prophecy of the birthplace of Christ. Throughout many ages, Christians of all sorts have accepted Bethlehem as the birth city of the Savior. Critics of the Book of Mormon point to a passage in Alma that insists that "[Christ] shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers" (Alma 7:10). There appears to be a discrepancy in the universally accepted Christian location of Christ's birth and that of the Book of Mormon prophecy. This discrepancy is only an illusion.

In the August 1984 issue of the *Ensign* magazine, D. Kelly Ogden explained this dilemma: "Towns and villages which surrounded larger demographic or political centers were regarded in ancient times as belonging to those larger centers. For a major city center such as Jerusalem to be called not only a city but also a land was standard practice."<sup>5</sup> This is not any different from our time either. For exam-

ple, Salt Lake City has many suburbs that surround it. People from Murray or West Jordan might refer to themselves as being from the "Salt Lake City area." In fact, "Bethlehem, a mere six miles from Jerusalem, was actually part of a district known as the 'land of Jerusalem,' of which Jerusalem was the capital. . . . Jerusalem at this period was more than just a city. Babylonian documents refer to Jerusalem as 'The city of Judah,' representing everything under the control of the king. Even the book of Jeremiah describes the siege of Jerusalem as a time when Nebuchadnezzar's armies fought 'against Jerusalem, and against all its cities. . . . So whether Alma was using the term 'Jerusalem' as a national designation for the kingdom of Judah or only the Jerusalem district, he is correct on both counts."<sup>6</sup>

Further support comes from ancient texts that vindicate this Book of Mormon statement. The El Amarna letters are an ancient text dating back to 1400 B.C. that refer to Bethlehem in the same manner: "The ancient writer of El Amarna letter #290 even refers to Bethlehem as part of the land of Jerusalem: In this letter is recorded the complaint of Abdu-Kheba of Jerusalem to Pharaoh Akhenaton that 'the land of the king went over to the Apiru people. But now even a town of the *land of Jerusalem*, Bit-Lahmi [Bethlehem] by name, a town belonging to the king, has gone over to the side of the people of Keilah."<sup>7</sup>

Rhetoric of this type is becoming common knowledge as more and more discoveries are being made in the ancient Near Eastern world. These evidences are unanimous in vindicating the Book of Mormon authors and its translator of what appears to be a colossal blunder in well-known Christian geography.

Aside from the Near Eastern geography, the Book of Mormon also captures many aspects of the ancient culture and sociology (much of which is still in practice today). The first fifty pages of the Book of Mormon contain many aspects of Near Eastern society, and almost all parts of Lehi's journey show cultural aspects of Near Eastern society that even today are considered cultural norms left untouched for hundreds of years. Such examples include Lehi's role as the head of the family and the other family characteristics displayed

by his group, their method of travel, their form of worship, their ancient record keeping, and the parallel between the English text of the Book of Mormon and its Semitic roots.

In Near Eastern society, the head of the household, or sheikh, is the governing body of the group. Hugh Nibley states, “While Lehi lived, he was the sheikh, of course, and the relationship between him and his family as described by Nephi is accurate in the smallest detail. With the usual deft sureness and precision, the book shows Lehi leading—not ruling—his people by his persuasive eloquence and spiritual ascendancy alone.”<sup>8</sup> Everything in their camp revolved around the center point of the sheikh and his tent as Lehi led the way of his party to the promised land. It was because of this family dominance that even Lehi’s rebellious children stayed with the wandering group in the desert. Victor Ludlow states, “Tribal identity and power was the basic social foundation of the people of the Book of Mormon. . . . Tribal affiliations generally had a stronger pull on the Book of Mormon people than religious commitments or political allegiance.”<sup>9</sup> Differing greatly from customs found in the United States, this sort of ideology would have seemed very unnatural for someone of Joseph Smith’s time who was writing about people and their way of life.

Another interesting cultural aspect of Lehi’s group is their traveling patterns in the wilderness. Nephi omitted many details in his description of the journey because they were, for him, commonplace. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon does it specifically mention the group’s mode of travel. When a group traveled into the desert, it was usual for them to go by camel. Although other modes of transportation were possible, such as by foot or by donkey, Nephi’s lack of specification implies that the group went by camel. Hugh Nibley makes a comparison with our day: if we were to tell someone that we were traveling to a nearby city, we wouldn’t need to specify that we were going by car unless the method of travel varied from that most common form. Also, the swiftness of Lehi’s sons’ subsequent journeys back to Jerusalem suggests the quickest means of travel of those times, or in other words—the camel.<sup>10</sup> If Joseph Smith were to have authored the Book of Mormon, it would

be expected that any variation from the cultural norms of his day would be distinguished in the text. In other words, in a day when common travel was by foot or by horse, a clarification would be expected if Joseph Smith were to have fabricated the Book of Mormon text in the early 1800s.

One other aspect of Lehi's wilderness journey is that "the Lord had not hitherto suffered that [they] should make much fire, as [they] journeyed in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 17:12). Was this just a trial for Lehi and his family? Maybe not. It is very common in the Arab world for raiding parties to fall upon traveling groups and rob them of all they had, so the "no-fire" stipulation by the Lord was likely a way of protecting them. Even in that region today, traveling desert groups refrain from lighting fires day or night to avoid contact with potential foes in the wilderness.<sup>11</sup>

Another of the group's cultural norms comes in the form of their religious rites. The Book of Mormon account says that just after making camp for the first time, Lehi "built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God" (1 Nephi 2:7). Considering their mode and method of travel, it is improbable that this caravaning group had an elaborate altar as part of their baggage. In the Near Eastern deserts, however, altars built from random stones are frequently seen in the region's landscape: "To this day the Bedouin makes sacrifice on every important occasion. . . . St. Nilus, in the oldest known eyewitness account of life among the Arabs of the Tih says, 'they sacrifice on altars of crude stones piled together.' That Lehi's was such an altar would follow not only from the ancient law demanding uncut stones, but also from the Book of Mormon expression 'an altar of stones.' . . . Such little heaps of stones, surviving from all ages, are still to be seen throughout the south desert."<sup>12</sup>

Interesting as the method of sacrifice may be, it is important to note what kinds of sacrifices the group was offering. S. Kent Brown notes that the rhetoric in the Book of Mormon shows that the group was strictly following the Mosaic law with regard to their sacrifices. Members of the group made peace offerings as a way of thanksgiving for safety in travel after each successful journey (when



Lehi's sons retrieved the brass plates, when Ishmael's family joined with the group, and so forth). When Lehi made burnt offerings for the group, it was for the purpose of purging sin from those within. When these sacrifices were offered, sin could clearly be seen in members of the group, be it murmuring or even a murder plot.<sup>13</sup> This form of worship is clearly expressed in the much-unchanged cultural society of today. It would have, however, taken more than a farmer from upstate New York to be able to describe this phenomena of "stone altars" and the timing and types of these sacrifices so accurately in his literature.

Another cultural norm of Lehi's time was that of recording ancient manuscripts. In the days of Joseph Smith, the idea of an ancient record engraved on gold plates seemed incomprehensible. Although unknown to all at the time, these types of engravings were very common in Near Eastern culture.

By now the discovery of writings on plates of precious metal, once the hardest thing to swallow in Joseph Smith's story, has become almost a commonplace in the Near East. In 1950 was announced the discovery, in a greatly eroded bronze (or "brass") vessel found in the Beritz Valley, of some silver-lead plates, rectangular, 4.5 by 5 centimeters, quite thin, and entirely covered with Semitic characters, 22 lines of them, pressed into the metal with a hard, sharp object. The plates are thought to be from the late Hittite period, i.e., from about Lehi's time. At the same time this find was announced, Dupont-Sommer described two newly-discovered sheets of gold and silver, bearing a Hebrew-Aramaic inscription of curious nature and mentioning the God of Israel. The script dates the documents from about 200 A.D.<sup>14</sup>

Once thought to be of a mythical, gold-digging origin, Joseph Smith's claim of having an ancient record engraved on gold plates is less unusual than before speculated.

One of the clearest evidences of the Book of Mormon's Semitic roots appears in the actual writing style of the book. The Book of Mormon is filled with Hebraisms that, according to John Tvetness, are "basically an English representation of something

that originally was Hebrew.”<sup>15</sup> It is clear that the Book of Mormon was not written in modern English. It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that the text is a good literal translation from ancient Hebrew. There are many different grammatical examples of this such as the construct state (*plates of brass* versus *brass plates*, *the voice of the Spirit* versus *the Spirit's voice*, and so on), compound prepositions (*by the hand of*, *by the mouth of*, and so on), and the use of the conjunction *and* in place of the comma in English.<sup>16</sup> Besides what have been listed, there are many other grammatical structures (too many to list in this paper) that have their roots in the Hebrew language. To reiterate this point, it would have been a remarkable feat for someone who could barely handle writing in English to come up with a text that follows Hebraic grammar and structure so closely.

#### SUMMARY

The writings of the Book of Mormon contain many evidences of Near Eastern culture and geography. Embedded in its text are many names and types of places that in the early 1800s, if not for the whole century, were deemed far-fetched and impossible. Such evidences could not have been proven in those times. Only in the last few decades have discoveries been made attesting to the reality of Book of Mormon places and ways of life. Places like Nahom and the Book of Mormon Bountiful have been found to exist in the Near East. Ancient textual references to “the land of Jerusalem” qualify Joseph Smith’s translation of the birthplace of the Savior. Aside from the geography, the unchanged social aspects of Lehi’s group still exist among the Arabic wanderers in modern society. Even evidence of the ancient custom of writing on metal plates has surfaced in recent years, as has an understanding of the consistency of a Hebrew-to-English direct translation. One might then ask, “How could such things have been known to an uneducated young man in the 1820s? Could he have just invented them all and been extremely lucky?” Reasonable answers would be that Joseph Smith did not know first-hand of the existence of such things, and even with a good imagination such coincidences would have been impossible to create on such

a large scale. Everything points to the heavenly account attested to by the Prophet Joseph Smith: that the record he received was of ancient prophets who began their narration centuries ago in the Near East and finalized it with their continental American history.

#### NOTES

1. Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (New York: Joseph W. Harrison, 1842), 3.
2. See Daniel C. Peterson, *A Scholar Looks at Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1995), 14.
3. Peterson, *Evidences*, 14.
4. Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, "In Search of Lehi's Trail—Part 2: The Journey," *Ensign*, October 1976, 59.
5. D. Kelly Ogden, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, August 1984, 51–52.
6. Matthew Roper, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 4:88–89.
7. Ogden, "I Have a Question," 52.
8. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 78.
9. Victor L. Ludlow, "Book of Mormon's Framework Shaped by Ancient Roots," *LDS Church News*, 2 January 1988, 7.
10. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 63.
11. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 72–73.
12. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 71–72.
13. See S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarabemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 6.
14. Hugh W. Nibley, "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study," *Improvement Era*, February 1954, 125.
15. John A. Tvetnes, *Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994), 1.
16. See Tvetnes, *Hebraisms*, 3–5.