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## Newly Found Altars from Nahom

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**Abstract:** Ancient altars in Yemen bear the inscription *Nihm*, a variant of the word Nahom. According to the Book of Mormon, one of the travelers in Lehi's group, Ishmael, was buried at a place called Nahom. Because the altar has been dated to about the sixth or seventh century bc (the time of Lehi's journey), it is plausible that the *Nihm* referred to on the altar could be the same place written about in the Book of Mormon. This article discusses the discovery site, the appearance of the altars, and the process of dating the altars, as well as the place-name *Nahom* in its Book of Mormon setting.



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# NEWLY FOUND ALTARS FROM NAHOM

WARREN P. ASTON

**M**ANY READERS have read about the finding of ancient votive altars in Yemen that appear to bear the Book of Mormon place-name Nahom. This significant find has been noted in the *Ensign* magazine,<sup>1</sup> in the April 2001 general conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,<sup>2</sup> and in a recently published volume by Terryl Givens in which he refers to these altars as “the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon” and “the most impressive find to date corroborating Book of Mormon historicity.”<sup>3</sup> This article considers the altars and their inscriptions, giving the background to this development and its significance within the larger context of research into Lehi’s journey across Arabia.

A 1999 article by S. Kent Brown in the *Journal* noted that an altar recently uncovered at the excavation of a temple near Marib in Yemen bore the tribal name Nihm, apparently a variant of Nahom, where Ishmael was buried while Lehi’s group was en route to Bountiful (1 Nephi 16:34).<sup>4</sup> Because archaeologists had already dated the altar to the seventh or sixth centuries B.C., Brown concluded that this earliest known reference to the name “very probably” referred to the Nahom of which Nephi wrote.

At that time it seemed unlikely that more could be learned about this find, since the altar was one of

two altars in an exhibit on ancient Yemen touring Europe since October 1997 and could no longer be examined at the Bar’an temple site.<sup>5</sup> Although a photograph of the altar appeared in the commemorative catalog accompanying the exhibit, the full engraved text—including the actual reference to Nihm—was not visible in the photograph, and readers had to be content with the translation provided in the catalog’s caption. Since then, however, two additional altars bearing the name Nihm have been identified at the same temple site.



The second altar with the NHM name stands solitary in the forecourt of the Bar’an temple east of Marib. *Right:* A typical altar from the Bar’an temple. Photography in this article by Warren P. Aston.



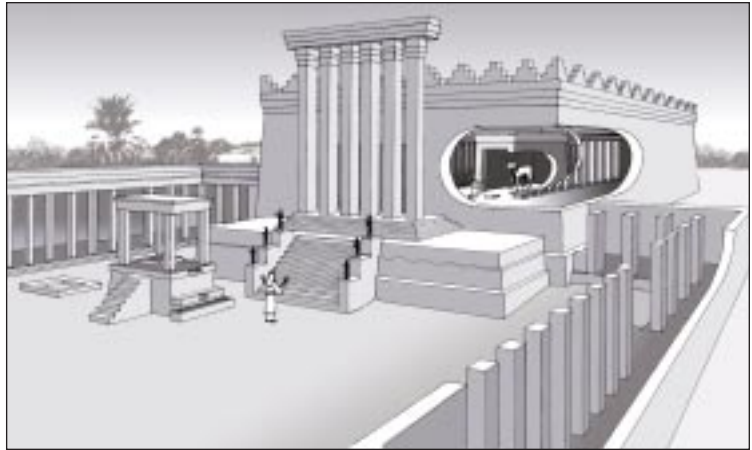
On 12 September 2000, I and fellow researchers Lynn Hilton and Gregory Witt identified and examined one of the two additional altars at the site,<sup>6</sup> where excavation and reconstruction had been completed by an expedition from the German Archaeological Institute. This artifact (denominated altar 2 for present purposes, reflecting its order in the identification of the three altars) was nearly identical—same size, same inscription, very similar style—to the one touring Europe (altar 1). Unknown to us at that time, another altar (altar 3) found at Bar'an bore an almost identical dedication formula. Due to ongoing restoration work and other circumstances, altar 2 was only briefly examined, measured, and photographed, along with being seen by 23 members of an LDS tour group.

Early in November 2000, I returned to Yemen and, with the kind cooperation of the German restoration team, was able to make an extended examination of all the altars at Bar'an, as well as the temple site itself. While documenting the finds, I examined and recorded several inscriptions on the temple walls and noted a further collection of altars from the site—eight largely intact and several broken—bearing differing inscriptions. Then during May 2001, David Johnson, a BYU archaeologist working in Marib as part of an excavation team, identified the tribal name Nihm on one of those altars (altar 3).

### History of the Site

The federally funded Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut (DAI), headquartered in Berlin, initiated the excavation of the Bar'an temple in 1988 as part of a larger project centered in the Marib province. Once excavation of the temple was completed in 1997, four seasons of restoration work followed, ending with the formal opening of the site to the public on 18 November 2000.

As the capital of the Sabaean (Sheban) kingdom around 2000–500 B.C., Marib was the economic and religious center of southern Arabia during the rise and zenith of the incense trade. From somewhere in this area Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, traveled to Jerusalem to meet with King Solomon, a prominent event in Arab history that scholars often discount as mere legend though it seems confirmed by refer-



The Bar'an temple included a large forecourt with a surrounding colonnade and a raised sanctuary to the east. Illustration by Michael Lyon and Andy D. Livingston.



The distance from Jerusalem to the Nahom region and the nearby city of Marib is approximately 1,400 miles. Map by Andy D. Livingston.

ences to it in the Old and New Testaments, the Talmud, and the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup>

Known locally as al-Amaid (the Throne of Bilquis), the Bar'an temple is prominent among the Sabaean ruins that survive in Marib to the present. These ruins include the impressive, huge Marib Dam, which permitted irrigation of a large area in ancient times (construction began before 600 B.C.), and the large Awwam temple nearby—currently in the early stages of excavation—which is believed to have been

built earlier than the dam. The Bar'an site lies about three miles from the ruins of the original city of Marib.

The temple structure was dedicated to the worship of the moon god Ilmaqah, although the names of two other Sabaean deities, Hawbas and Athtar, also appear in some engravings. At some point near the beginning of the Christian Era, the Bar'an temple was largely destroyed and the worship of Ilmaqah began to decline. It is possible that the plundering of the temple took place during the Roman campaign of Aelius Gallus around 25 B.C. Although repairs and modifications were made, the temple had lost its significance by then and began to fall into diminishing importance. As southern Arabia turned from polytheism to Christianity and Judaism by the late fourth century A.D., a second destruction of the temple forecourt took place. In succeeding centuries the Marib Dam finally collapsed, and as a result the area lost most of its population. The temple site was gradually covered by desert sands.<sup>8</sup>

Until just a few years ago, all that was visible at the Bar'an site were six columns (one broken) projecting above the sand. The underlying temple structure, including many of the altars, has been well preserved by the sand and desert climate.

### The Altars

Constructed of solid limestone locally quarried, each altar stands about 26 inches high with the top measuring 21.5 inches long and 14 inches wide. The dedication inscription carved around all four sides of the altars is in three-inch-tall lettering written in the South Arabian script of that period.

The altars in this temple do not bear the names of incenses (unlike altars that were commonly used for burning incense), nor do they seem suited for any type of sacrifice. As gifts to the temple, they served primarily a votive function by symbolically recording various offerings to Ilmaqah, usually in fulfillment of a vow or promise. Three of the altars bear the name of a single donor, Bi'athar, a fact that underscores his status and wealth.

The altars are not identical. For example, compared to altar 1, altar 2 has more damage to its corners, exhibits 11 rectangular "tooth" shapes below the text on each long side instead of 12, and has five horizontal ridges above the window-shaped recesses instead of four. Likewise, altar 3 has some extensive damage on its sides. Moreover, the text is positioned slightly differently around the sides of all three altars.



Altar 3, the third altar inscribed with the NHM name, stands in the back row on the right. This altar has been moved to the raised sanctuary of the Bar'an temple.

### Inscription on Altar 2

In simple terms, the inscription on altar 2 (reproduced below), which is essentially unchanged on altars 1 and 3, tells us that Bi'athar, clearly a man of wealth and importance and the grandson of Naw'um, member of the Nihm tribe, donated three altars to the temple.

#### Transliteration

- (1) B-<sup>c</sup> t t r / b n / ś w d m / b n / N w <sup>c</sup> m / N h m y
- (2) n / h q [n y / ] l m q h / F r <sup>c</sup> t / b-
- (3) <sup>c</sup> t t r / w-b- / ' l m q h / w-b- / D t - H m y m / w-b-
- (4) Y d <sup>c</sup> -> l / w-b- / M <sup>c</sup> d k r b.

#### Translation

- (1) Bi'athar son of Sawdum, son of Naw'um, the Nihmite,
- (2) has dedi[cated] (to) Ilmaqah (the person) Fari'at. By
- (3) 'Athtar, and by Ilmaqah, and by Dhat-Himyam, and by
- (4) Yada'-il, and by Ma'adi-karib.<sup>9</sup>

### Dating the Altars

French researcher Christian Robin, author of many works dealing with the Nahom/Nihm area, has assigned a date of between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. for altar 1.<sup>10</sup> Construction of a sacred place at this site probably began before 1000 B.C., evolving through at least three identifiable



Altar 2, with the name NHM enlarged at left (read right to left).

stages of construction into an ever more substantial temple complex. The three altars donated by Bi'athar appear to precede or belong to a fourth period of construction beginning in the late sixth or fifth century B.C., at the height of the influence of the Sabaeen kingdom. The date has been further refined by the altar texts themselves, which refer to the ruler Yada<sup>c</sup>-il, who is likely Yada<sup>c</sup>-il Dharih II (about 630 B.C.) or perhaps Yada<sup>c</sup>-il Bayyin II (about 580 B.C.).<sup>11</sup> This places the making of the altars within decades of the time that the Lehtes made their desert odyssey.

Significantly, however, since Naw<sup>c</sup>um of the tribe of Nihm was the grandfather of Bi'athar, the Nihm name must be at least two generations—perhaps another century—older still, certainly predating the arrival of the Lehtes to the area.

### Nahom in Nephi's Record

In a single verse, 1 Nephi 16:34, Nephi tells us all that he wished us to know about the place called Nahom: "And it came to pass that Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom."

From this and one other terse statement in the Book of Mormon we learn several facts about the location:

1. The wording makes it clear that Nahom was not named by Lehi's party but was already known by that name to local people. Thus other people were already

settled in proximity to the Lehtes encampment.

2. Nephi's Bountiful lay "nearly eastward" from Nahom (1 Nephi 17:1).

3. Nahom was, or at least included, a place of burial. Note that Nephi does not state that Ishmael *died* there, only that he was *buried* there, implying that it included an established burial place.

Let us review these three elements in the light of the altars that have been found. Until now, the earliest reference to the NHM name came from historical and religious writings in Arabic that may rest on information that goes back to the first century A.D.<sup>12</sup> As already noted, the altar finds take us another seven centuries earlier, squarely linking us to the time period referred to in

the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints no longer need to conjecture whether the name existed at the time Nephi wrote—it did.

In my view, it is unlikely that Lehi and his family passed close to Marib. After leaving Nahom, northwest of Marib, the "nearly eastward" route recorded by Nephi would have taken them along the uninhabited southern edge of the Empty Quarter, some distance north of Marib. They were then no longer on the famed incense route but were traveling parallel to its eastward leg.

Most readers of the *Journal* will be aware of the ongoing fieldwork being conducted on the southern coast of Oman.<sup>13</sup> This area, the only one that matches Nephi's detailed description of "Bountiful," lies within one degree of being due east of the Nahom region. Such precise directional linking of Nahom with the only plausible site for Bountiful is striking confirmation of the accuracy of Nephi's account.

We now come to the third aspect of Nahom—that it was a place of burial. As Nephi wrote his account years later in the New World, he surely realized that he and his family would never return to the burial place of Ishmael, his father-in-law and a grandfather to his children; thus he was careful to place on record the name of that place. The altar discoveries lend strong support to the view that



anciently Nahom/Nihm may have extended over a much larger area than it now does, a concept first proposed in 1995.<sup>14</sup> While we cannot be certain, Bi'athar would have been unlikely to contribute to a temple that lay outside his tribal area. The simplest explanation is that in his day the Nihm tribal area extended at least as far east as Marib, a view that modern-day scholars have no problems accepting.

Furthermore, this new window into the ancient past of southern Arabia tells us rather clearly that the origin of the name Nahom is connected to a place of burial. And its name is also tied to the Nihm tribe living in the area. Scholars have recognized for some time that the Semitic roots of the name Nahom closely relate to sorrow, hunger, consoling, and mourning, obviously very appropriate for a place of burial, and may therefore reflect the origin of the Hebrew name used by Nephi.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time that the Bar'an excavation was completed, a French team conducted the first archaeological examination of a huge area of ancient burial tombs at 'Alam, Ruwayk, and Jidran, just 25 miles north of Marib.<sup>16</sup> While there are isolated burial tombs scattered throughout the Nahom region, this vast cemetery covering many square miles and numbering many thousands of tombs is the largest burial area known anywhere in Arabia.

If in fact Nahom extended into this region in ancient times, this burial area now takes on special significance. The tombs date back as far as 3000 B.C., evidence of the large population in the area even earlier than the generally accepted dates of the Sabaean period, when Marib was at the height of its influence in the region. Could this unique site be the actual scene of “the place which was called Nahom”—the actual burial area referred to by Nephi?



Altar 1, on which the name NHM was first identified, is currently on tour with the Queen of Sheba exhibit in Europe.

Seen from any perspective, S. Kent Brown's original assessment of this development as being “dramatic new evidence” in the quest to place Nahom firmly on the modern-day map holds true. Nephi implied that a place in southern Arabia named Nahom already existed in his day, and now three chiseled blocks of stone from a pagan temple in Yemen provide incontrovertible evidence that, in fact, it did. 📖

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Warren P. Aston

1. See "Book of Mormon Linked to Site in Yemen," LDS Scene, *Ensign*, February 2001, 79.
2. See Elder John K. Carmack, "United in Love and Testimony," *Ensign*, May 2001, 76.
3. Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120, 121.
4. See S. Kent Brown, "'The Place Which Was Called Nahom': New Light from Ancient Yemen," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 66–68.
5. This altar (altar 1) is still on tour in Europe at the time of this printing and is scheduled to be displayed at a major exhibit in the British Museum in London, entitled *Queen of Sheba: Treasures of Yemen*, from June to October 2002.
6. The inscription on the second touring altar did not mention Nahom but contained a typical dedication: "Il-ʿAmir son of ʿAmmi-ʿAhi, son of ʿAthyān, has dedicated [the person] Yithaʿ-radum. By ʿAthtar, and by Ilmaqah, and by Dhat-Himyām." The beginning of the text is marked with a symbol unique to the god Ilmaqah and was usually used by royalty and their officials in dedicatory inscriptions to the moon god.
7. See, for example, 1 Kings 10:1–13 and other Old Testament references to Sheba and the apparent acceptance by Jesus Christ of Queen Bilquis as a historical figure as recorded in Matthew 12:42 and Luke 11:31.
8. Further details of the site history as now understood can be found in Burkhard Vogt et al., "Arsh Bilqis"—*The Temple of Almaqah of Barʿan in Marib* (Sanaʿa, Yemen: German Institute of Archaeology, 2000). Examples of other in-situ inscriptions at the site are included by Norbert Nebes on pp. 16–18.
9. As Kenneth Kitchen notes, the name Nihm or Nuhm occurs in both Arabic tradition and in much earlier Safaitic graffiti in the Syrian–north Arabian deserts, once in a graffito in the Hadramaut. References appear in G. Lankaster Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 602ff. Christian Robin, in *Yemen au Pays de la reine de Saba* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), dates altar 1 to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. using maximum chronology (p. 144). The ruler Yadaʿ-il noted on the altars would possibly be Yadaʿ-il Dharib II or Yadaʿ-il Bayyin II (roughly 630 and 580 B.C., respectively) on that basis. See Kenneth Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, Part 2 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 744.
10. Christian Robin et al., eds., *Yemen au Pays de la reine de Saba*, 144.
11. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2:744.
12. Warren P. and Michaela K. Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 22–25.
13. S. Kent Brown et al., "Planning Research on Oman: The End of Lehi's Trail," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 12–21.
14. Warren P. Aston, "Some Notes on the Tribal Origins of NHM," an unpublished paper delivered 22 July 1995 at the annual Seminar for Arabian Studies at Cambridge University.
15. The South Arabian root NHM has to do with stone cutting whereas the Hebrew root has to do with consolation. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 636–37; and Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabaean Dialect*, Harvard Semitic Series No. 25 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982), 296.
16. Tara Steimer-Herbet, "Megaliths in Yemen," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 29 (2000). The tombs are also discussed and pictured in Aston and Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, 19–20 and color plate.