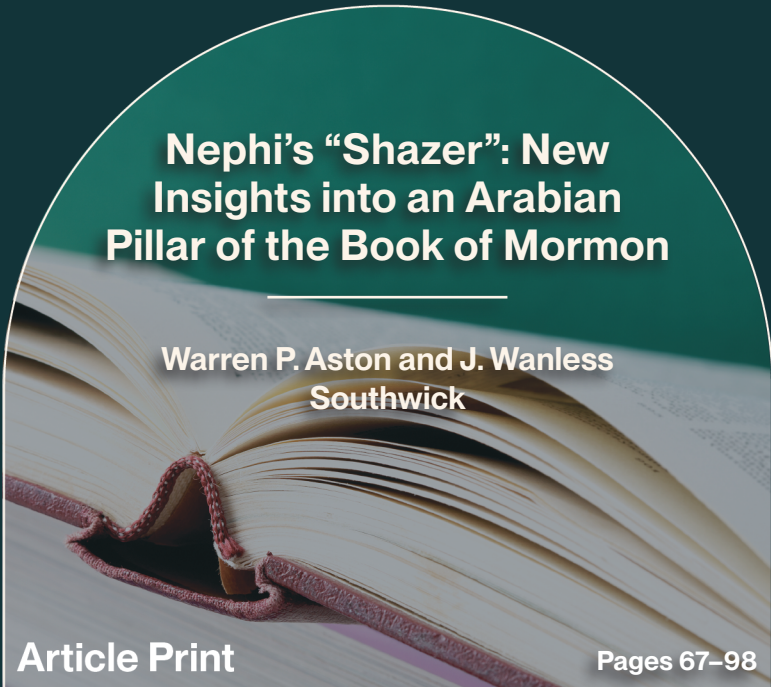


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**Nephi's "Shazer": New  
Insights into an Arabian  
Pillar of the Book of Mormon**

**Warren P. Aston and J. Wanless  
Southwick**

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# Nephi’s “Shazer”: New Insights into an Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon

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**Warren P. Aston and J. Wanless Southwick**

**Abstract:** *Shazer was a brief hunting stop, given that name by Lehi and Sariah’s group journeying to the New World. It has the unique distinction of being a place in a real-world location that is clearly defined in Nephi’s text using precise parameters. Because a highly viable location for the Valley of Lemuel has been established as a seemingly certain location, there is a solid anchor for further exploration. After reviewing earlier proposals, this paper presents the findings of a new research effort. While absolute certainty will likely remain elusive, the new information discussed here demonstrates the accuracy of Nephi’s record-keeping. It shows his description to be significantly more literal and consistent than previous commentary has assumed. This can be illustrated primarily by examining travel distances and directions he recorded that embody geographical specifics that no one in 1830 could have known. This paper then presents a new candidate for Shazer and its adjacent hunting area, which appears to match Nephi’s description much more closely than other proposals. This article thus refreshes the picture of this brief but highly significant part of the Old World crossing, with its implications for the route taken from Shazer deeper into Arabia.*

**T**hroughout much of the last two centuries, many commentators — restricted to written sources that were often incomplete — could only approximately map the Old World journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful as recounted in the first eighteen chapters of the Book of Mormon. Understandably, the earliest commentaries essentially only restate Nephi’s text. Their basic comments gave encouragement to

readers to see the characters as real people in real environments. However, with more recent research, it is possible to add the unfolding awareness of the actual Arabian setting. Combining new, on-the-ground field research along with the accuracy of Nephi's text in describing it, there is a fascinating process to trace.

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord spake unto my father by night, and commanded him that on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness. And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness.

And it came to pass that we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness. And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman.

And it came to pass that we traveled for the space of four days, nearly a south-southeast direction, and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer. And it came to pass that we did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families in the wilderness, to the place of Shazer. And we did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction, keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea. (1 Nephi 16:9–14)

### **Early Engagement by Believers in the Book of Mormon**

George Q. Cannon, an early Apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was one of the first writers to utilize non-scriptural sources in his 1888 book, *The Life of Nephi: the Son of Lehi*. He mentioned the travels through Arabia of an intrepid Finnish explorer named Georg Wallin, earlier that century. Traveling southward in the Tabuk Province, near where Lehi's group had commenced their trek, Wallin

recorded that his general travel direction was, interestingly, south-southeast, which the locals determined by “always [having] the polar star on his left shoulder-blade.”<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, English convert and Church leader George Reynolds attempted the first analysis of names found in the Book of Mormon and proposed possible locations for places mentioned in the text. His prolific writings drew attention to the Book of Mormon in a period when it was little used within the Church.<sup>2</sup>

The first significant scholarly step forward came with the writings of Hugh W. Nibley in the 1950s. Nibley’s training in classical writing and ancient languages demonstrated that the Old World setting of the Nephite text fits into the real world in ways that neither Joseph Smith nor his peers could have envisioned. Nibley’s writings remain foundational to the present day.<sup>3</sup> His studies opened new doors for other scholars to penetrate the ancient culture in which the Book of Mormon begins. Two decades later, the next stage began—moving beyond texts alone to actual exploration of Arabia in order to further bring the Book of Mormon out of obscurity.

The first attempt to visit the Arabian setting of the Book of Mormon did not come until early 1976, when Lynn and Hope Hilton traveled to Saudi Arabia and Oman in an effort to identify the locations of Lehi’s odyssey. The Hiltons had a background of business experience in Saudi Arabia, so that in preparing for this assignment from the *Ensign* magazine, they had the resources of Nibley and other scholars to help them. Their findings were first published in the *Ensign*<sup>4</sup> and in two

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1. George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Nephi: the Son of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 40, [scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book/life-nephi-son-lehi/](http://scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book/life-nephi-son-lehi/). Cannon came across this method of determining and maintaining direction while reading the report of Georg Wallin’s journey across Arabia.
  2. George Reynolds, *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon, Comprising Its Biographical, Geographical and Other Proper Names* (Salt Lake City: Joseph Hyrum Perry, 1891), [archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/reynolds/2016-05-04/george\\_reynolds\\_a\\_dictionary\\_of\\_the\\_book\\_of\\_mormon\\_1891.pdf](http://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/reynolds/2016-05-04/george_reynolds_a_dictionary_of_the_book_of_mormon_1891.pdf).
  3. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 2nd ed. ((Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1988), [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/50/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/50/).
  4. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, “In Search of Lehi’s Trail, Part 1: The Preparation,” *Ensign*, September 1976, 32–54, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/1ca7c9bd-d27f-47e5-890e-d9a07634cad9/0/36;LynnM.HiltonandHopeA.Hilton,“InSearchofLehi’sTrail,Part2:TheJourney,”Ensign,October](http://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/1ca7c9bd-d27f-47e5-890e-d9a07634cad9/0/36;LynnM.HiltonandHopeA.Hilton,“InSearchofLehi’sTrail,Part2:TheJourney,”Ensign,October)

books, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (1976),<sup>5</sup> followed by an updated version in 1996 entitled, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*.<sup>6</sup> From the beginning, they saw the journey to Nahom as being along the Red Sea coast, rather than over an inland trade route. The Hiltons' original model located the Valley of Lemuel at the town of al Bad'a, centered in the large Wadi Ifal,<sup>7</sup> with Shazer probably situated at Wadi Azlan (now usually identified as Wadi Aznam), on the coast of the Red Sea. In their 1996 book, the Hiltons changed this suggestion for Shazer to a place now known as al Muwaylih. They also adopted new findings to identify Nahom as being in the tribal area of Nihm, in modern-day Yemen.

Although based on actual visits to the Middle East, the Old World model presented to the Latter-day Saint community by the Hiltons was not universally embraced at the time. One example is a 1995 book that proposes a geography of the entire Book of Mormon but is not based on any actual exploration in Arabia. Moreover, it was written without reference to any previous studies such as those published by Nibley and the Hiltons.<sup>8</sup> This book begins by proposing a location for the Valley of Lemuel at Wadi Nuwaybi in Jordan, and an indeterminate desert spot south-southeast for Shazer. From that starting point, the inconsistencies multiplied, ignoring both scriptural and geographical realities. The author suggests that the easterly travel from Nahom to Bountiful resulted in a proposed Bountiful in northeast Oman, then continued with a western sea crossing of the Atlantic and an arrival in the eastern United States. This is contrary to the Book of Mormon account.<sup>9</sup> His version of the Book of Mormon New World geography

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1976, 34–63, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/c2524583-c9f2-4f15-9dda-77b9e67b8d00/0/35](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/c2524583-c9f2-4f15-9dda-77b9e67b8d00/0/35).

5. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), [archive.org/details/insearchoflehist0000hilt/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/insearchoflehist0000hilt/mode/2up).
6. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*, rev. ed. (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996), [archive.org/details/discoveringlehin0000unse](https://archive.org/details/discoveringlehin0000unse)
7. The Arabic term *wadi* refers to a valley, ravine, or channel that is dry except in the rainy season.
8. Paul C. Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: A Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, UT: Bradford & Wilson, 1995). Unfortunately, he was not alone. For example, in 1998 Duane R. Aston (not related to Warren P. Aston) first published *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived* (Sacramento, CA: American River Publications, 1998), advancing an Old World geography even further removed from scriptural and geographic realities.
9. Assuming that the place where Lehi landed in the New World is the same

proposes that the ancient Book of Mormon civilization lived in what is now the eastern and southern parts of the United States, rather than in Mesoamerica. This is a concept that some authors continue to support.

More information was soon forthcoming from extensive explorations by George Potter and Richard Wellington, a Latter-day Saint team working in Saudi Arabia. Building upon the pioneering visits of the Hiltons and conducting relevant background research, their 2003 study, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, was a watershed publication.<sup>10</sup> It was the most thorough Old World analysis to that point. In 1995, Potter and Wellington were the first to locate Wadi Tayyib al Ism, now universally accepted as the only plausible candidate for the Valley of Lemuel. However, the authors applied Nephi's "nearly south-southeast" direction from the town of al Bad'a, in the center of the large drainage of Wadi Ifal, which is the same place the Hiltons proposed could have been the Valley of Lemuel. This assumption led them to Wadi Agharr, now known as Wadi esh Sharma, a long wadi in an east-west direction that they proposed as Shazer. In advocating for Wadi esh Sharma as the probable site of Shazer, they also suggested that this wadi allowed Lehi's group to turn eastward (inland) to reach the well-established trade route that ran roughly southeast toward Yemen. Although they did not undertake exploration in Yemen, they accepted the discovery of the tribal area of Nihm as *Nahom*, and proposed a location, Khor Rori, as Nephi's "Bountiful" in southern Oman.

In 2013, Kirk Magleby published an impressive series of posts on his blog, "Things Near and Far." He attempted to reconcile distances mentioned in the Book of Mormon with modern satellite maps of the earth.<sup>11</sup> He used Lehi's three-day trek from the northern tip of the Red Sea (Aqaba) to Wadi Tayyib al Ism to estimate that Lehi traveled

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place they called "the place of their fathers' first inheritance" (Alma 22:28), then Lehi's landing site is on the western seashore of the New World.

10. George Potter and Richard Wellington, "Shazer and the Most Fertile Parts," *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 73–78. While key elements have since been superseded, this source nevertheless contains much valuable information, especially chapter 3, "The River of Laman and Valley of Lemuel," which also covers a proposed location for Shazer.
11. Kirk Magleby, "Things Near and Far," *Book of Mormon Resources* (blog), 23 April 2013, [bookofmormonresources.blogspot.com/2013/04/things-near-and-far.html](http://bookofmormonresources.blogspot.com/2013/04/things-near-and-far.html). Calculated speed per day is an average because the distance traveled each day could vary greatly due to the terrain.

approximately 36 “air kilometers” (22 straight-line miles) per day. Magleby then projected a four-day, straight-line distance, estimating the location of Shazer to be on the western coast of Arabia. Later, under the heading, “Test #6 Relative Distances,” he located Shazer “along the 5 kilometer [3 mile] Saudi coastline between Wadi Maharish on the north and Wadi al Ghal on the south, about 15 air kilometers [9 miles] northwest of modern Duba.”<sup>12</sup> Magleby’s blogs detailed how this area is in the correct direction for travel, as stated in 1 Nephi 16:13 (“nearly a south-southeast direction”), and fits the Book of Mormon description of Shazer as a place where hunting success could be found.

### New Textual and Field Exploration

The foundation for this present study began with extensive fieldwork over several years in Israel, Jordan, Yemen, and Oman; all intended to shed new light on the settings of Nephi’s account. This included the possible routes that Lehi’s group could have taken to leave Jerusalem and travel to the Red Sea and into Arabia. Providentially, new political developments in Saudi Arabia began to open access into the country’s northwest area—the Tabuk province—which was previously all but closed to outsiders. This allowed a new study inside Saudi Arabia in 2018, which included an extended 5,720-kilometer (3,554-mile) survey. It ran from the Jordanian border in the north to near the Yemen border in the south, exploring both the interior and the entire coastline of Western Saudi Arabia. This exploratory period, and another in 2019, also focused on candidates proposed for the Valley of Lemuel. Once completed, the first conclusions were published in *BYU Studies Quarterly*, proposing the route that seemed to best match the account of the journey from Jerusalem to the Valley of Lemuel. Further, new exploration had confirmed that Wadi Tayyib al Ism was not only the most plausible candidate for the Valley of Lemuel, it has no viable competing candidates.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Kirk Magleby, “Test #6 Relative Distances,” *Book of Mormon Resources* (blog), 18 March 2014, [bookofmormonresources.blogspot.com/2014/03/test-6-relative-distances.html](http://bookofmormonresources.blogspot.com/2014/03/test-6-relative-distances.html)

13. For the unique features of the Valley of Lemuel with its implications for Shazer based on new exploration in Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, see Warren P. Aston, “Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah’s Escape from Jerusalem, Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 99–126, [byustudies.byu.edu/article/into-arabia-lehi-and-sariahs-escape-from](http://byustudies.byu.edu/article/into-arabia-lehi-and-sariahs-escape-from)

The 2018–2019 research began by addressing specific earlier proposals made for the location of Shazer. This involved a full investigation of each location, assessing each of them against Nephi’s own descriptions. It concluded that of the four candidates proposed (one in Egypt and three in the Tabuk region of Saudi Arabia), Wadi esh Sharma appeared to be the best fit. The findings from these studies were published in 2020 in the *Interpreter* journal, titled “Nephi’s ‘Shazer’: The Fourth Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon.” To date, it was the most comprehensive examination related to Shazer.<sup>14</sup>

In 2024, independent research was initiated by Wanless Southwick and later included Warren Aston. It was proposed that Shazer was likely located near the mountain, Jebel Shar, and its foothills. This was an area where seasonal water drains toward the Red Sea through streams and several wadis, one of them today named *Wadi Maharish*. The location was identified using Google Earth satellite images. It mapped the route Lehi would likely have been directed to follow from the Valley of Lemuel in Wadi Tayyib al Ism. It ran through mountainous terrain and across coastal plains, traveling in nearly a “south-south-east” direction (1 Nephi 16:13) for a distance of four days’ travel. The area of Wadi Maharish showed terrain that appeared to be suitable for camping and hunting and provided fresh water. However, on-site exploration was needed.<sup>15</sup>

With these baselines in place, the authors began a collaboration to re-examine Nephi’s account of the four-day journey from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer more closely, utilizing improved satellite-based imagery and maps of the terrain. However, the same developments

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-jerusalem-perspectives-suggested-by-new-fieldwork/. In summary, the key elements center around the valley fitting Nephi’s description of being “three days” travel from their arrival at the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:5–6) and being the only perennial water source reaching the Red Sea. The lack of viable alternatives allows us to confidently state that the location of the Valley of Lemuel is known with a high degree of certainty.

14. Warren P. Aston, “Nephi’s ‘Shazer’: The Fourth Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020): 53–72, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-shazer-the-fourth-arabian-pillar-of-the-book-of-mormon](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-shazer-the-fourth-arabian-pillar-of-the-book-of-mormon). This was later published in Warren P. Aston, Godfrey J. Ellis, and Neal Rappleye, *Into Arabia: Anchoring Nephi’s Account in the Real World* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Tooele, UT: Eborn Books, 2024), 109–27.
15. J. Wanless Southwick, “The Journey to Bountiful Begins,” in *Arabia’s Mountain of God where Moses, Elijah, and Lehi Met with God* (Rexburg, ID: Southwick Research, 2024), 33–36.

that offered new on-site exploration opportunities in Saudi Arabia in 2025, also introduced new challenges to physically access. This was primarily because of large-scale construction projects across the Tabuk region where all the sites of interest are located. At the time of this writing, the believed location of the Valley of Lemuel, for example, is closed to all visitors, and the general area southeast of it, where Shazer must lie, is being increasingly impacted.

Despite major logistical challenges, new on-site exploration in the region was conducted by Warren Aston in 2025 to focus on sites of potential significance to Lehi's odyssey. The major goal of this new exploration was to ensure that such sites were in accord with the mapping and were more fully documented.

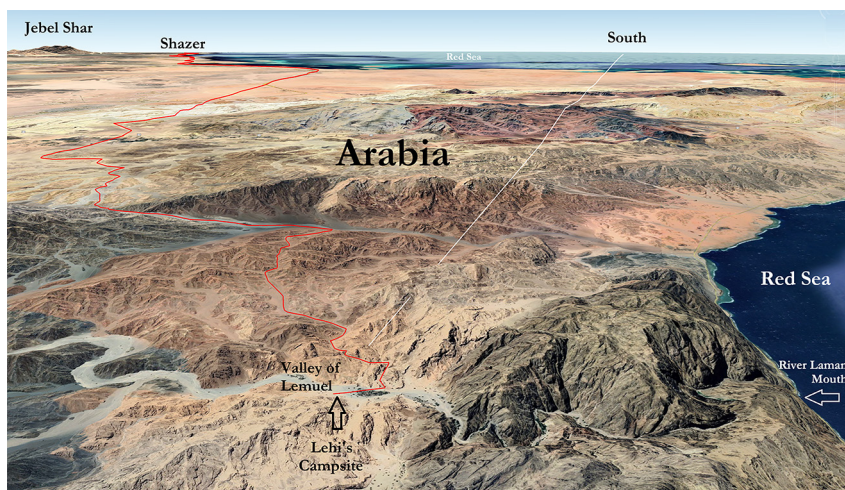
### **The Physical Setting for the Journey to Shazer**

To obtain a basic understanding of the world in which most of the journey of Lehi's family took place, it is necessary to truly appreciate the first eighteen chapters of the Book of Mormon combined with the new information presented below. In the physical sense, that world is dominated by the Arabian Desert, the second largest desert on Earth. It occupies almost the entire Arabian Peninsula and is therefore the backdrop to most of the Old World journey, from their arrival at the Red Sea until reaching Bountiful.

The images and maps presented in this paper give some indications of the physical environment involved, along with its variety (see figure 1). Although Arabia is known for its desert sand dunes, at least two-thirds of the terrain consists of plains, plateaus, mountains, valleys, and volcanic fields. Travelers generally avoid sand dunes because loaded camels require fairly level and firm terrain. Mountain wadis and coastal plains are more suitable for camel travel, which fact helps in following Lehi's trek though western Arabia.

#### **Mountain wadis**

Rain is a rare occurrence in the dry desert environment of Arabia, but when it comes, it often arrives in dangerous abundance, filling canyons with flood water. Torrents of water wash mountain debris downhill and leave layers of sand and silt in the bottoms of valleys. Usually dry, these wadis become mountain highways for human travelers. Lehi's travel would almost certainly have followed these wadis for them to arrive at the Valley of Lemuel and to exit from it.



**Figure 1.** A panoramic overview of the terrain facing Lehi’s group as they exited the Valley of Lemuel and traveled to Shazer. The red line suggests the route they may have traveled. The straight white line points to south. (Image from Google Earth.)

### “Most fertile” and “more fertile” parts

As today, some parts of the desert in Arabia in Lehi’s time were more fertile than others, and Nephi carefully makes this point (1 Nephi 16:14, 16). Suitable fertile places became populated communities. The Book of Mormon records that Lehi traveled “in the most fertile parts of the wilderness” (vv. 14, 16) and “in the more fertile parts of the wilderness,” but there is no mention of encountering other people. However, that is implied. A “fertile part of the wilderness” probably meant availability of fresh water, vegetation for livestock grazing, and hunting opportunities for caravan travelers.

### Camels and survival

The camel stands as a critical contributor to the survival of the group. Thousands of years ago, the single-hump dromedary, first domesticated in Arabia, became indispensable for desert travel. The species expanded across the region, allowing settlements and towns to emerge and regular overland trade to develop. On level ground, an adult camel can carry loads up to 400 or 500 pounds for a week or longer without drinking or feeding. This was an essential element for nomadic desert people who had to carry all their belongings with them.

For Lehi’s group, camels would have provided additional benefits

such as carrying the ill, the elderly, and small children. In addition to carrying the heavy tents, provisions, and the all-important seeds, camels also provided hair fiber for weaving, skins for clothing, and dung for fuel. Lehi's Old World journey simply could not have taken place as it did without camels, the ultimate desert transport.

### Overview of Lehi's Trek across Arabia

When the focus narrows specifically to Lehi's journey, further clarity emerges about its setting. Leaving their homeland behind, they arrived at the most northerly point of the Gulf of Aqaba, the long and narrow eastern arm of the Red Sea, traveling near modern-day Aqaba and then turning southward.<sup>16</sup> When they reached the point where the ancient trade routes and modern highways turn eastward, Lehi's group continued south for three days (1 Nephi 2: 5–6). During that time, they traveled along the coast, until they reached the Mazhafa mountains, which extended to the sea and entirely blocked the coastline. Then, following wadis from the coast up into the mountains to find a way to continue southward, they eventually reached the Wadi Tayyib al-Isim oasis, hidden deep inside the mountains.<sup>17</sup> Lehi must have relied on some combination of local knowledge, perhaps previous travel experience, and surely heavenly inspiration to find the wadi oasis.

It should be noted that the Wadi Tayyib al-Isim, which Lehi named the "Valley of Lemuel" (1 Nephi 2:10, 14), is several miles in length. Photographs of the "firm and steadfast, and immovable" gorge area of the wadi, emptying into the Red Sea (v. 9), are readily available to readers.<sup>18</sup> Less known are details of the "River Laman" (v. 8) that Lehi prayed would be an inspiration to his son, Laman (v. 9). Photos of the perennial flow of water in the bottom of the canyon today, and evidence of past huge floodwaters on the canyon walls, can be seen in the book, *Into Arabia*.<sup>19</sup> Infrequent rainstorms in the upland mountain area sends torrents of water down branches of the wadi, which then

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16. Comparisons of several possible routes from Jerusalem to Aqaba can be seen in Warren P. Aston, "Lehi and Sariah's Escape."

17. The likely route from Jerusalem and from Aqaba to the Tayyib al-Isim is described in Aston, "Lehi and Sariah's Escape," 15–20.

18. See discussion of the Valley of Lemuel and photos of Wadi Tayyib al Isim in Scripture Central Staff, "Book of Mormon Evidence: Valley of Lemuel," Evidence 121, 28 November 2020. [scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-valley-of-lemuel](https://scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-valley-of-lemuel).

19. See figures 12 and 13 in Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*, 27–28.

funnel into a narrow canyon gorge at the Red Sea end of Wadi Taayyib al Ism, causing life-endangering flash floods.<sup>20</sup> Lehi would likely not have located their base camp in that dangerous gorge. However, about 3 kilometers (2 miles) inland and upstream, the base of the valley becomes wider, palm trees grow, and there Lehi could have “pitched his tent in [the] valley by the side of a river of water” (v. 6). Isolated and secure, with date palms and fresh water, the enclosed oasis could have served as a staging post for them to prepare for the great one-way journey that lay ahead. (Figure 1 shows a proposed camping site for Lehi near the oasis. It also shows the orientation of the Wadi Tayyib al Ism.)

After Lehi was commanded to leave the valley, the Liahona was given to him (1 Nephi 16:10). Thereafter, the group’s route was dictated by the pointers in this divine instrument, rather than by merely joining a well-worn trade route with its regular water holes. The Liahona first led them out of the valley, through the surrounding mountains, and around a second barrier of high terrain, to reach flat southern plains. At that point, their path probably followed the natural route taken by today’s Highway 5 along the coast of the Red Sea, as they trekked onward to Shazer. This route allowed them to avoid several difficult areas of volcanic rock encountered early in the journey.

Nephi makes it clear that after Shazer, the Liahona’s directional guidance continued: “And we did follow the directions of the ball, which led us in the more fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:16). This is a reminder that the Liahona was the single most significant factor in allowing Lehi’s group to locate water and to survive a landscape that was potentially hostile for such city dwellers. This guidance continued for some distance, including the well-known incident wherein Nephi’s bow broke and he had to fashion a new bow and arrow out of wood (16:18–32). Here, an additional function of the Liahona is vividly demonstrated. When writing appeared on the ball, the Lord commanded Lehi to read it, which caused him to “fear and tremble exceedingly” (vv. 26–27). Writings on the “pointers . . . in the ball” (vv. 28–29), and

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20. There is an interesting video that illustrates how canyon rocks in the area have been worn smooth by flash flooding. See Blue Abaya-Explore Arabia, “Wadi Tayeb Ism in Tabuk province. Rain water is flowing out of the canyon into the Red Sea,” *Facebook*, 27 October 2018, [facebook.com/BlueAbayaBlog/videos/wadi-tayeb-ism-in-tabuk-province-rain-water-is-flowing-out-of-the-canyon-into-th/185567152358692/](https://www.facebook.com/BlueAbayaBlog/videos/wadi-tayeb-ism-in-tabuk-province-rain-water-is-flowing-out-of-the-canyon-into-th/185567152358692/).

“directions . . . upon the ball” guided Nephi to find prey to slay for food (vv. 30–32).

In verse 33, the Liahona is not mentioned, but it was likely its guidance that caused a further change in direction when the group resumed their travel. Significantly, Nephi noted that they now traveled “*nearly* the same course as in the beginning.” This small change in direction led them inland from the coast, through one of the gaps in the mountains, and into the interior where “after many days” they arrived at a place where they pitched their tents to “tarry for the space of a time” (v. 33). The next verse records that “Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom” (v. 34). We now know that Nahom was a large tribal area with numerous burial grounds. There is reason to believe that there was a large Jewish population that could have assisted with Ishmael’s burial.<sup>21</sup>

After the burial at Nahom, it was likely that the Liahona signaled the final change to their direction on the Arabian journey, one that Nephi later described as being “nearly eastward from that time forth” (1 Nephi 17:1). The route took them across the most difficult stretch of their Arabian crossing. In that final stage — from Nahom to Bountiful — they navigated a narrow separation between two major dune deserts, being empty places that are avoided even by present-day Bedouins. This precisely mirrors Nephi’s text in verse 1, detailing their hardships. Arriving on the high Yemen plateau, they were directed to enter a particular wadi valley, initially indistinguishable from others, and one of only two possible valleys leading them to a hidden and singular place of abundance, unmatched anywhere else on the Arabian Peninsula. Here were all the resources to sustain a small community and to build a ship — all this in an era when no ocean-going vessels were known to have been built in Arabia.

The Liahona provided the entire directional guidance, even before the first steps from the Valley of Lemuel, while later in the journey it also gave written communication. A glimpse into how this divine instrument

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21. This is discussed extensively in Neal Rappleye, “The Nahom Convergence Reexamined: The Eastward Trail, Burial of the Dead, and the Ancient Borders of Nihm,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 1–86, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-nahom-convergence-reexamined-the-eastward-trail-burial-of-the-dead-and-the-ancient-borders-of-nihm](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-nahom-convergence-reexamined-the-eastward-trail-burial-of-the-dead-and-the-ancient-borders-of-nihm). This was later published as chapter 4 in Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*, 129–209.

may have functioned in pointing Lehi to the exit from the Valley of Lemuel and beyond, has recently been offered by new research.<sup>22</sup>

Being familiar with other practicalities that are involved in desert survival can assist the reading and visualization of the Book of Mormon text. In addition to the need for water and a means of transportation, there are multiple skills and abilities that aid survival in a harsh environment. It is now generally accepted that Lehi—and possibly also Ishmael and some of their sons—had some level of experience traveling in remote areas in connection with Lehi’s likely trade.<sup>23</sup> Whatever skills and abilities came from previous travels in the region would have provided invaluable lessons to pass on to family members, particularly in the early stages of their journey.

Nephi does not specifically mention the use of camels nor of encountering other people, and there are also other things that were likely available to the travelers that can help in understanding the journey narrative. In the background of his primary focus (detailing significant faith-instilling events), Nephi included only the most critical subjects that would help the reader visualize the events. This includes such details as the directions and durations of the various stages of the journey, along with names of places. The rest of the picture is to be inferred.

Lehi’s odyssey across Arabia spared his family the destruction at Jerusalem and the resulting exile. Lehi’s family was able to establish a new branch of Israel on the Western Continent. In all their journeying, including with their great ocean journey across two-thirds of the planet to the New World, the group’s obedience was key to the unerring navigational directions from the Lord, through the Liahona.

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22. J. Wanless Southwick and Kyle Kinghorn, “Why was the Liahona a Sphere? A New Perspective on its Form and Function,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 66 (2025): 151–76, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/why-was-the-liahona-a-sphere-a-new-perspective-on-its-form-and-function](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/why-was-the-liahona-a-sphere-a-new-perspective-on-its-form-and-function). The paper includes several illustrations that suggest what Lehi and Sariah’s group may have seen while in the campsite on the morning of departure, looking across the oasis and its river to the ridge just beyond. This is the first real-world visualization to be attempted, based on the actual locations, in any proposal for the Liahona.

23. See the summary in Neal Rappleye, “Lehi the Smelter: New Light on Lehi’s Profession,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 223–25, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehi-the-smelter-new-light-on-lehis-profession](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehi-the-smelter-new-light-on-lehis-profession).

## Commentary on Nephi's Book of Mormon Account

Six scriptural verses (1 Nephi 16:9–14), which are cited at the beginning of this article and are repeated for convenience at the beginning of the following sections, are all that Nephi recorded in connection with the brief stop they named *Shazer*.

It is unknown how long Lehi and Sariah's group stayed at the Valley of Lemuel, but it was likely at least several months and perhaps up to a year.<sup>24</sup> It involved Lehi and Sariah's sons making two trips back to Jerusalem to obtain their written history (the plates of brass) and to invite another branch of their family to join them (Ishmael, his wife, and their children). During their stay in the Valley of Lemuel, they studied the sacred plates and received revelations. It was also a time of significant social celebration when the sons of Lehi, along with Zoram, the servant of Laban, paired with and married the daughters of Ishmael. Because they knew God had promised them "a land which is choice above all other lands" (1 Nephi 2:20), it can reasonably be assumed that most in the party were eager to move on towards their promised land.

### On the morrow

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord spake unto my father by night, and commanded him that on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:9)

For the modern reader with a Western mindset, this verse appears quite straightforward: the Lord speaks to Lehi during the night and commands him to take his family and leave the Valley of Lemuel in the morning. That visualization is reinforced by the verse that follows, describing how Lehi arose "in the morning" (1 Nephi 16:10) to find the Liahona sitting on the ground outside his tent. Nephi's compressed account may provide more information about of the daily world of a *Judahite*, a member of the southern Kingdom of Judah in Lehi's era.

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24. See Godfrey J. Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years in the 'Wilderness': Reconsidering Definitions and Details," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): especially 317–23, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details). This was later published as chapter 2 in Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*, 31–108. Ellis's work stands as the most thorough examination of the various travel periods spent in each location, from Jerusalem to Bountiful. He convincingly overturns common assumptions about the length of the Arabian crossing and his analysis deserves careful study.

This was a world largely governed by religion-based traditions and practices.

For Lehi’s group, the concept of what constitutes a *day* and a *night* varies from modern Western culture. For them, each day ended at *sunset*, not at midnight. Each new day began at sunset.<sup>25</sup> This has a major implication for how this verse is read, because when Lehi was commanded to begin his journey “on the morrow,” it may not have meant that the departure happened during the next period of daylight as we might assume. Rather, it may have begun after the next sundown, either in the night hours that followed, or, more likely, after the next sunrise. Appreciating this may help in understanding how the group was able to complete all the preparations listed in verses 11 and 12; to gather all their provisions and other items, to bring a variety of seeds, and finally to “take our tents” as Nephi expressed it. The latter required emptying, collapsing, and packing the heavy tents onto their camels, which were tasks involving hours of arduous work.

### The Liahona

And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:10)

Some readers of the First Book of Nephi have theorized that the Liahona somehow gave the travelers compass directions for travel. However, Nephi’s text is clear that the Liahona, with its two spindles, functioned very differently from a magnetic compass. Instead of pointing north, the Liahona pointed the direction to travel. This is an important distinction. The first mention of the Liahona in the Book of Mormon says that one of its two spindles pointed “the way whither we should go into the wilderness” (1 Nephi: 16:10), *not* by any directions appearing on the surface of the Liahona or on the spindles. However, later

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25. See the general introduction to that era and region in John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt, “Culturegram: Jerusalem 600 B.C.,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 1–40, [scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/culturegram-jerusalem-600-bc](http://scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/culturegram-jerusalem-600-bc). Page 8 refers to how days and nights were determined, citing Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Instructions*, trans. John McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:178–94.

descriptions about the functioning of the Liahona makes it apparent that *both* spindles were required to point the direction of travel (Alma 37:40). Several stories in the narrative illustrate that this divine instrument worked not by magnetism but by the faith of Lehi and Sariah’s family. Thus, only divine direction could cause the Liahona to point the way they should go.<sup>26</sup>

### **Packing up to leave**

And it came to pass that we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:11)

Although Lehi’s group may not have known exactly when they would leave the valley where they had lived in tents, potentially for many months, they likely made general preparations to move on. However, when Lehi received directions from the Lord to depart (1 Nephi 16:9), breaking camp would have been a significant task. They had to take down multiple semi-permanent tents and pack up “whatsoever things we should carry . . . the remainder of our provisions [and] seed of every kind” (1 Nephi 16:11). Many hours of work by all members of the group would have been required before the first heavily loaded camel could be led from the campsite.

The matter of the seeds carried on the journey across Arabia has attracted a great deal of commentary over the years, much of it focused on exactly where they had collected or bought the seeds that Nephi said, “we had brought from the land of Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 18:24). In his 2023 article, “Nephi’s Eight Years in the ‘Wilderness,’” Godfrey Ellis also addresses an equally important aspect: How were the seeds stored to ensure they remained viable for planting in the New World, as Nephi records?<sup>27</sup>

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26. For a comprehensive analysis of the Liahona, see Southwick and Kinghorn, “Why was the Liahona a Sphere?” The suggested function of the Liahona is discussed, with the real-life example of leaving the campsite in the Valley of Lemuel pictured.

27. Ellis, “Nephi’s Eight Years.” His research includes an important consideration of the issue of seed viability and its implications for the timing of Lehi’s land and ocean journey.

## Across the river and through the mountains

And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman. (1 Nephi 16:12)

The next brief phrase "*we did take our tents*" understates the work involved in preparing the group's many camels for travel, collapsing the extremely heavy tents, packing provisions and other items, and then loading the camels.

The unknown way ahead of them was viewed as wilderness, considered empty and largely uninhabited. In describing the actual departure from their camp, Nephi adds a telling and usually overlooked detail: They first crossed the river Laman. Because their southward direction of travel is stipulated in the next verse, Nephi reveals that the camp had to have lain on the north side of the valley, because its river flowed westward through the wadi down to the Red Sea, only about 3 kilometers (2 miles) away. The fact that the river Laman sometimes floods with extreme life-threatening force, extending its normal width and uprooting adult palm trees, suggests that the timing of the departure was in a period when it ran quietly.<sup>28</sup>

Almost directly opposite the most plausible location for a campsite, new exploration reveals that there is a short wadi—a valley that offers a route through the *Mazhafa* mountains that surround the Valley of Lemuel. The true nature of this wadi is hidden from easy view. The fact that it branches sharply eastward just a short distance inland, before then turning southward, cannot be seen from its beginning, but only by entering it (see figure 2). It thus remained undetected over years of exploration and other visits by Latter-day Saints. It was first discovered in November 2019 and reported in the 2020 article about Shazer.<sup>29</sup>

This site is completely consistent with 1 Nephi 16:12, including the

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28. See the images of a recent flood event, uprooting adult palm trees, at the Red Sea exit of Wadi Tayyib al Ism in December 2019, in Warren Aston, "What Did the River of Filthy Water and the River of Laman Look Like?" *Scripture Central* (blog), 22 January 2020, [scripturecentral.org/blog/what-did-the-river-of-filthy-water-and-the-river-of-laman-look-like](http://scripturecentral.org/blog/what-did-the-river-of-filthy-water-and-the-river-of-laman-look-like).

29. The existence of a previously unknown wadi leading directly from the Valley of Lemuel is displayed in a map published in Aston, "Nephi's Shazer," showing the optimal departure route from the campsite (see image 6 in that article), including photographs taken inside the exit wadi (images 4 and 5). See also Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*. Although not noted in the book, the front cover image and image 2 show the entrance to the wadi leading out of the Valley of Lemuel, lying behind the prominent ridge sitting just behind the oasis and trees.



**Figure 2.** Oasis of Tayyib al Ism (Valley of Lemuel), approximately 3 kilometers (2 miles) east of the waters of the Red Sea, as viewed from a spot near Lehi's likely tent site, looking toward the only southerly exit from the valley.

features described by Nephi and their positions relative to each other. This includes the likely campground being on the north side of the valley, and the only exit permitting travel in a southerly direction. This exit can only be accessed by crossing the river between them; all these features can still be seen today and result in a strong correlation. Taking the hidden exit route results in a total travel distance of about 6 kilometers (4 miles) from the camp, crossing the river, and then traveling through the first area of mountainous terrain.

The next possible exit from the oasis campsite, allowing travel in a general south-easterly direction, is a little longer, being about 10 kilometers (6 miles), arriving only a short distance from where the "hidden" route arrives. But more problematic than a slightly longer distance, this route contradicts Nephi's text in two main respects. First, it does not require the river to be crossed, at least not initially as Nephi describes. Second, rather than the direction recorded in Nephi's account, it requires initially traveling in an easterly direction, before then making a turn south.

We can conclude that the shorter, hidden, and more direct exit is optimal. It is not only entirely adequate, but is also the only option exactly fitting Nephi's word picture of their departure from the Valley of Lemuel.

In summary, the Liahona unerringly led them across the river Laman in the Valley of Lemuel, into a hidden exit, through the Mazhafa

mountains, and then around another area of high terrain before arriving at flatter countryside in the south. The red line in figure 1 suggests the route they may have traveled.

### Travel duration and direction

And it came to pass that we traveled for the space of four days, nearly a south-southeast direction, and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer. (1 Nephi 16:13)

This verse includes three main components: travel duration, direction, and their name for the campsite. The duration of the journey was "four days" from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer. This can be converted to distance by applying the rate of travel. We know that Lehi's family traveled about 130 kilometers (81 miles) from the northern tip of the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba to Wadi Tayyib al Ism in three days (see 1 Nephi 2:5–6). This was approximately 44 kilometers (27 miles) per day, which is consistent with speeds reported for camel caravans from other historical sources.<sup>30</sup> Thus, four days of travel could take them about 176 kilometers (108 miles).

The group members must have been energized spiritually with renewed reassurance and optimism after witnessing the gift of the Liahona. The spindles in that compass-like ball pointed the specific way they should travel toward their promised land, strongly suggesting that they were not just slowly meandering through the wilderness. They were probably enthusiastic about arriving in their promised land as soon as possible. Also, the text makes no mention of any contention or discord among members of the group during this period (1 Nephi 16:5). For these reasons, this first leg of travel may have been among the fastest that they would travel during their long trek.

Nephi's text appears to closely match the known realities of desert travel and such travel has two styles that are followed by Bedouins even today. Depending on the season, the terrain, and the load being carried, the group either slept out in the open at night or, very often,

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30. Early accounts of Arabian travel are illuminating, such as that by Alois Musil, *The Northern Hegaz, a Topographical Itinerary* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1926), [archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.234493/page/n3/mode/1up](http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.234493/page/n3/mode/1up). Pages 264 and 328, for example, document a great variety of distances covered in a day, depending on multiple factors. The travel speeds and distances recorded by Nephi are reasonable and fit comfortably within the spectrum found in historical sources.

traveled during the cool night hours, sleeping by day wherever they could find or improvise shade. Because of the effort involved, the large tents were erected only when a stop of at least a few days was planned. Unloading the camels and erecting the large and heavy tents was sufficiently noteworthy for Nephi to record each stop of extended time. Nephi gives no hint of searching to find a camping place, possibly suggesting that the Liahona guided them to trail-side locations that provided at least three critical resources:

- Fresh water for camping was a must. The group's water supplies would be low after four days of travel unless they had deviated to local wells during the journey to Shazer. There are several locations where wells were possible after leaving the Valley of Lemuel.<sup>31</sup>
- Vegetation for grazing their animals is also a logical necessity. Once again, this is an apparently abbreviated account that provides limited detail. Again, there is nothing mentioned in 1 Nephi about other people living at Shazer during the Lehites' brief stay in that oasis, so there likely wouldn't have been any competition for the water and vegetation.
- Hunting opportunities is required by the text. Nephi records in 1 Nephi 16:14 their hunting with bows and arrows and returning to the encampment with fresh meat for the group. Game animals require their own vegetation and water sources, which must have been present in or near where they hunted. A less obvious corollary is that wild animals in Arabia such as oryx, gazelle, ibex, and goat are normally only found where the terrain includes hills and mountains.

The introduction to the First Book of Nephi states that the book will describe "the course of their travels," which it does by describing how Lehi's family left Jerusalem, traveled to the Red Sea, and then spent three more days to reach the Valley of Lemuel. After camping there for months, they received the Liahona, which thereafter pointed the way they should go into the wilderness. The Liahona led them further south for four days through the mountains and across the plains adjacent to

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31. Ancient wells survive today in *al Bad'a* in Wadi Ifal, the biblical area of *Midian*, in the inland oasis of *Wadi Sharma*, which coastal end Lehi's party had to cross, and wells again mentioned to be at *al Muwayleh*. However, the text does not note deviations to any of these places, and, because only four days travel are involved, it is probably safe to assume that the first water replenishment was obtained at Shazer.

the Red Sea to a place they called *Shazer*. Nephi later recorded that they had been traveling in "nearly a south-southeast" direction (1 Nephi 16:13) from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer. That appears to have been an explanatory remark to clarify that the direction they had traveled was "south of southeast" or "a little east of direct south," but not a compass bearing. Lehi obviously did not have a magnetic compass with "SSE" stamped on its rim. He had the Liahona, which pointed the way they should travel through the wilderness.

It is important to not minimize the abilities of people in the past to know where they were on the globe and in what general direction they were moving. To enter Nephi's world, one must recognize that anciently people did not perceive directions as we do today; directional terms varied from culture to culture. While they may not have had magnetic compasses or maps, they did have general directional awareness. Spatially, even when in unfamiliar places, they had an orientation provided by the position of the sun, where each morning's sunrise marked "*east*," and at the end of the day, sunset marked "*west*." Knowing *east* and *west* automatically indicated where *north* and *south* were. At night, the cloudless Arabian sky gave a clear view of the North Star (which was named *Kochab* during Lehi's time), thus providing a precise location for the direction *north*.

Although the general course of Lehi's trek through Arabia was indeed nearly in a straight south-southeast direction, it was not because of Nephi's precise navigational skills, but the result of the Liahona guiding them through "the more fertile parts of the [Arabian] wilderness" with no compass bearing required. This suggests that 1 Nephi 16:13 should probably be read with an emphasis on "south" rather than on the compass-like punctuation of "south-southeast," which is the phrase currently used in the Book of Mormon.<sup>32</sup>

In scripture, the level of directional accuracy recorded in 1 Nephi

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32. For the remainder of this paper, we will use the punctuation of "south, southeast" rather than the current punctuation of "south-southeast" to emphasize the point. Every edition of the Book of Mormon from 1830 to 1920 used the punctuation "south, southeast." See "Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829–circa January 1830," p. 29, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/33](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/33); "Book of Mormon, 1830," p. 39, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/45](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/45); and page 31 in the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon, [archive.org/details/bookofmormonacco00bookoof/page/30/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/bookofmormonacco00bookoof/page/30/mode/2up).

16:13 seems to be unique to Nephi. It occurs again in 1 Nephi 17:1, albeit relating to one of the four cardinal directions (east), when he records the direction from Nahom to Bountiful as “nearly eastward from that time forth.” With the location of Nahom now archaeologically attested,<sup>33</sup> the most recent Old World studies strikingly confirm that Nephi’s directional statements are objectively accurate in linking Shazer, Nahom, and Bountiful to the modern map. “Nearly eastward” from Nahom leads to the only location on the Arabian coast that has the fertility and all other features described by Nephi, something no one in 1830 could have known. Furthermore, this accuracy in determining directions has obvious and major implications for the directions recorded for the New World setting that makes up the bulk of the Book of Mormon.

Nobody knows how often Lehi’s group consulted the Liahona for directions, but unlike a compass that points in just one direction, the Liahona actively led them through “the more fertile parts of the wilderness,” implying deviations from a straight line of travel. They would have checked the Liahona frequently for any changes in its divine guidance toward the next fertile part of the wilderness and whenever they had questions about which way to go. For example, after following the “hidden” wadi for the first 6 kilometers (4 miles) of their four-day trek, they had to make a choice. As they reached the end of this path from the oasis, they arrived at a major new wadi running east-west (visible in figure 1). This consisted of low mountains and broken up hills straight ahead. They were faced with three options to continue southward:

- The first option lay directly in front of them. It would have presented a steep and difficult climb through a wide field of debris at the base of a ravine, quickly narrowing as it ascended to the highest point.
- The second option (which would have been an obvious choice for someone just wandering southward) made a sharp turn to the right to follow the new wadi downhill as it descends in a westerly direction toward the Red Sea, then allowing a turn southward along the coast (see figure 1).
- The third (though less intuitive) alternative was nevertheless

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33. Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 56–61, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1289&context=jbms](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1289&context=jbms).

the one we believe would have been given to them by the Liahona: make a sharp turn to the left and travel uphill in an easterly direction for 3 kilometers (2 miles) until they could descend toward a flat pathway crossing through low hills, followed by several options to turn southward onto the plains and continue toward an oasis that they would later call *Shazer* (1 Nephi 16:13).

Although the conclusion is speculative, we believe that the evidence presented above, and illustrated in figure 1, strongly suggests that the Liahona directed them to travel via this third option.

Lehi's group called the place where they stopped *Shazer* (1 Nephi 16:13). The reason for the name choice can be readily deduced by its physical features. To describe those features, consider the following comment from Hugh Nibley about this name:

So we have Shihor, Shaghur, Sajur, Saghir, Segor (even Zoar), Shajar, Sozura, Shisur [or Shisr today], and Shisar, all connected somehow or other and denoting either seepage—a weak but reliable water supply—or a clump of trees. Whichever one prefers, Lehi's people could hardly have picked a better name for their first suitable stopping place than *Shazer*.<sup>34</sup>

### Hunting ground and departure

And it came to pass that we did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families in the wilderness, to the place of Shazer. And we did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction, keeping in the most fertile parts

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34. The etymology of the name "Shazer" is briefly discussed in Aston, "Nephi's 'Shazer,'" 54–56. The Nibley commentary is cited in Hugh Nibley, "Appendix: Echoes and Evidences from the Writings of Hugh Nibley," in *Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 461, [scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/appendix-echoes-and-evidences-writings-hugh-nibley/](http://scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/appendix-echoes-and-evidences-writings-hugh-nibley/). For a fuller treatment regarding Shazer, see Robert F. Smith, *Book of Mormon Onomasticon & Theological Word Study, The Ethnological Foundations of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Deep Forest Green Books, 2025), 3:445–47, [play.google.com/store/books/details/Robert\\_F\\_Smith\\_Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_Onomasticon\\_Theologi?id=CAIxEQAAQBAJ](https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Robert_F_Smith_Book_of_Mormon_Onomasticon_Theologi?id=CAIxEQAAQBAJ) that provides links and commentary on Shazer from several Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint sources.

of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea. (1 Nephi 16:14)

This verse introduces a detail that has not always been appreciated in commentary about Shazer. Shazer was the place of *encampment* but was not the place where the actual *hunting* took place. Nephi's account makes it clear that he and the other young men went forth *from* Shazer "into the wilderness to slay food for our families," and afterwards, "did return again to our families . . . to the place of Shazer." The two locations are undoubtedly not a great distance apart but must be recognized as separate places and with differing characteristics. This may seem like a small point, but it is a distinction that is vital for any attempt to identify plausible locations.

It might be noted that their diet required animal protein, not just plant foods such as dates. Thus, animal flesh was needed in addition to other categories of sustenance, which were limited for these travelers. Under the Mosaic Law that they strictly followed, the game animals they hunted would likely have included the Arabian oryx, which can weigh up to 460 pounds (209 kg); the Nubian ibex, weighing up to 165 pounds (75 kg); and the mountain gazelle, weighing up to 66 pounds (30 kg).

The final sentence of 1 Nephi 16:14 notes the group's departure from Shazer and, once again, Nephi encapsulates significant detail in concise wording. The reader may notice the repeated term, *wilderness*, used four times in this verse. This word draws attention to the fact that whether they were referring to Shazer's campground, to the hunting area, or to the onward journey, it was all wilderness, likely uninhabited. Inadvertently, or perhaps intentionally, this verse, with its repetition of *wilderness*, offers another subtle reminder that the group was not following a well-traveled trail where food items and replacements for broken hunting implements would have been available.

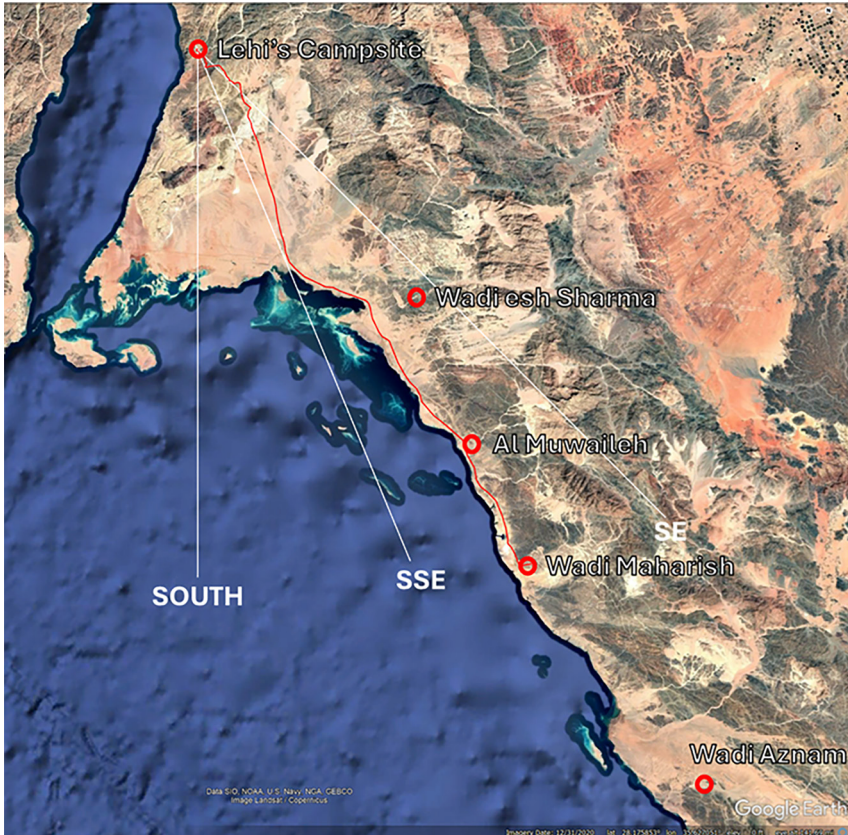
Nephi notes that they departed "*following the same direction*" (therefore in nearly a "south, southeast" direction). He added the significant amplification that the Liahona's guidance kept them "in the most fertile parts of the wilderness," where they could hunt food, and that these fertile parts were "in the borders near the Red Sea."

Here, if nowhere else, it is clear that Lehi's group traveled along the coastal strip beside the Red Sea, known today as the *Tihama*. Inland, paralleling the coast, lay the "borders," the mountains, with their dry wadis, which became seasonal rivers descending to the Red Sea.

This border area offered fresh water, hunting opportunities, and perhaps salt-water fish at short stopping intervals.

### Proposed Locations for the Place Called Shazer

As described earlier, we first conducted further study and exploration into the three original candidate locations. Then, in 2025, we explored the new proposal for Shazer, Maharish, which emerged after closer examination. All four candidates lie along a relatively short section of the Red Sea coast, with the Midian and Shar mountains lying inland. From north to south, they are Sharma, Muwaylih, Maharish, and Al Aznam (see figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Directions and candidate locations for the Shazer campsite along the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Red line is possible route taken by Lehi's group from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer. (Image from Google Earth.)

## **A summary of each Shazer candidate**

### ***Wadi Esh Sharma***

The northernmost candidate, Sharma, offers two inland oases surrounded by nearby rugged terrain and hunting opportunities. However, the directions required to access it seem to conclusively rule it out as *Shazer*. To reach the oases of Sharma, travel from the coastal strip must be in an *easterly* direction. To then depart from these oases, travelers would have to either continue in an easterly direction further inland until the commercial trade route is reached, or backtrack to the coast (in other words, in a westerly direction) and only then resume the journey in the straightforward “south, southeast” direction recorded in Nephi’s account.

### ***Muwaylih***

The coastal site of Muwaylih includes a well and a small area of vegetation. Hunting opportunities lie some distance inland where there are several wadis with sporadic small streams crossing the plains. Behind the plains are the Shar mountains, which would offer hunting opportunities. However, the distances involved make this site less likely as a candidate for the Shazer campsite.

### ***Maharish***

Maharish is the general area between the candidate sites of Muwaylih and Al Aznam, stretching inland from the coast, eastward across a wide plain to the Shar mountains. Potential locations for the Shazer campsite consist of the mouths or lower stages of the several small wadis containing sporadic rivers descending to the coast from the mountains.

### ***Al Aznam***

This, the southernmost candidate, sits near the coast but, aside from freshwater wells, it offers little vegetation. It sits a considerable distance from higher terrain inland where there could be hunting opportunities.

## **Comparison of candidate sites**

With Wadi Tayyib al Ism identified as Lehi’s camp in the Valley of Lemuel and the beginning for the journey to Shazer, the various candidates for the location of Shazer can be evaluated (see table 1). Although all four

candidate locations offer fresh water, grazing, and hunting grounds, they are not equally "fertile."

The most fertile candidate is Sharma. However, reaching it requires several notable deviations in direction (as noted earlier), and it requires only about two days travel, not Nephi's "four days" from the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 16:13). The least fertile is the fourth candidate, al Aznam, which requires five days travel from the Valley of Lemuel. The candidate most closely matching Lehi's four-day, "nearly south, south-east" travel to Shazer and its hunting grounds is the Maharish location.

**Table 1.** Comparison of the four Shazer candidates by several factors.

Factor	Sharma	Muwaylih	Maharish	Al Aznam
Land distance from campsite in Valley of Lemuel	82 km (51 mi)	128 km (80 mi)	153 km (95 mi)	220 km (137 mi)
Daily travel speed required to arrive in four days	21 km (13 mi)	32 km (20 mi)	39 km (24 mi)	55 km (34 mi)
Days travel at 43 kilometers (27 miles) per day	1.9	3	3.6	5.1
SSE direction of travel?	Yes+East	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fresh water and grazing pasture?	Abundant	Some	Suitable	Scarce
Mountain hunting area?	Surrounds	Nearby	Adjacent	Distant

## Maharish and its Hunting Grounds

As with the ancient Shazer encampment, four days travel in the direction recorded by Nephi brings the modern traveler to an area between the present-day coastal towns of Al Muwaylih and Duba. The general Maharish area lies between these settlements and extends from the coast to the interior mountains. We have termed this general area *the Plain of Maharish*, after the wadi of that name (see figure 4). The broad plain begins at the base of a steep mountain range, dominated by Jabal Shar, which is 1,950 meters (6,397 feet) in height. The mountain provides run-off water over most of the area and feeds several intermittent freshwater streams.

The mouth of Wadi Maharish itself is a prime possibility for being the location of the Shazer encampment, but other wadis nearby, such as Wadi al Byda and Wadi al Ghal, also remain possibilities. Unfortunately, recent construction has obscured large swaths of the coastal area, including the mouths of these wadis and areas of inland terrain. An



**Figure 4.** The Maharish area showing its terrain and the locations mentioned in the text. (Image from Google Earth.)

updated map of the area is available to interested readers.<sup>35</sup> A general view of the possibilities can be seen in figure 4.

One can imagine Lehi’s caravan traveling southward along the Arabian coast between the waters of the Red Sea on the west (see figure 5) and a long line of coastal hills on the east. Then, on the fourth day of this portion of Lehi’s journey, the coastal hills give way to a broad plain where freshwater flows and forage for their animals increases (see figure 6).

The neighboring hills and the more distant mountain look like good hunting grounds (see figure 7). No doubt grateful that God had provided the means whereby they [could] “accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7), they found a suitable place and pitched their tents, calling their campsite *Shazer*. The men took their bows and arrows and went into the mountain and its foothills to slay food for their families. After a successful hunt, they returned to their camp with the food they had obtained. Likely encouraged by their success, they broke camp and continued their travel down the Arabian coast in the same direction as before.

35. See [mapcarta.com/12566540/Map/](http://mapcarta.com/12566540/Map/).



**Figure 5.** Views of the Red Sea coast in the vicinity of our proposed Shazer showing palms, vegetation, and freshwater sources. Fishing is also possible here.



**Figure 6.** Camels demonstrate their ability to survive in a desert environment with minimal vegetation and scarce water, both being features of the Maharish plains.

## Summary and Conclusion

The precision of Nephi’s detail in describing the physical surroundings and the directions of a journey to a specific location in Arabia some 2,600 years ago is without parallel. It is simply remarkable. This specificity, only fully appreciable nearly two centuries after the first publication of Nephi’s record in March of 1830, engenders additional appreciation of his ability to record descriptive observations, including “the course of their travel.”<sup>36</sup>

The exactness of the match between the Maharish area and Nephi’s description of Shazer and its hunting area demonstrates how truly Shazer remains a remarkable, solid, “pillar” of the Book of

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36. As noted earlier, the introduction to the First Book of Nephi specifically mentions that his record would include “The course of their travels.” Nephi fulfills this promise through his descriptions of all the major junctures of the Arabian journey—from the Red Sea to the Valley of Lemuel and the river Laman; then to Shazer as discussed herein, including directions and other descriptors allowing us to follow the route to Nahom (which still carries that name), and from there to the great ocean at Bountiful, concisely described with a wealth of precise details. We are fortunate that Nephi was prompted to incorporate this level of geographical information, as it can assist readers in establishing the credibility of his scriptural text.



**Figure 7.** A general view of Maharish in the dry season, facing eastward and showing the terrain inland of the proposed coastal campsite of Shazer. Temporary pools of water remain for a time after the annual rains, while springs function all year around. The dramatic mountains in the distance (the highest being Jabal Shar) show areas where the hunting of game animals may have taken place.

Mormon's Old World setting. It further enhances confidence that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient record.



**[Authors' Note:** *The photography is by Warren P. Aston. There has been no manipulation of photographic images by any means, such as filters, editing software, or AI programs. The mapping was prepared by J. Wanless Southwick. Merging our mutual sense that Nephi's story of Shazer deserved closer scrutiny has been an invigorating experience. We greatly appreciate the guidance of our editors, Godfrey Ellis and Allen Wyatt, and the feedback from anonymous reviewers. Robert F. Smith was a reliable source of linguistic expertise; we thank him for keeping us on track.*]

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