

Interpreter

A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship

Wonder No More: A Review of *Into Arabia*

Brant A. Gardner

Article Print

Pages 149–156

© 2025 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by the Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org

Wonder No More: A Review of *Into Arabia*

Brant A. Gardner

Review of Warren P. Aston, Godfrey J. Ellis, and Neal Rappleye, *Into Arabia: Anchoring Nephi's Account in the Real World* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2024). 298 pages. \$44.99 (hardback), \$39.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *Into Arabia is a collected reprint of six articles. The first chapter reprints an article that first appeared in BYU Studies. The other five appeared in Interpreter. Both BYU Studies and Interpreter are peer-reviewed academic journals, which means that all these articles were examined and reviewed prior to publication. Thus, my review is more of a synopsis of the importance of each chapter rather than a detailed critique.*

Internet conversations on diverse forums frequently repeat the idea that there is no archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon. The charge is almost always directed to the New World portion of the Book of Mormon. Both those asking the questions, and too frequently those Latter-day Saints who respond, are solely focused on the New World. That focus ignores the fact that there is significant archaeological evidence supporting the Old World portion of the Book of Mormon. Specifically, the journey Lehi's family took from Jerusalem to the Old World Bountiful provides the best archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon.

One of the specific reasons that there is a difference in the quality of archaeological research in the Old World versus the New World is the availability of writing, and particularly names, that trace to the appropriate time. The New World geography of the Book of Mormon continues to be debated because there is no specific named place

where one might begin. That isn't the case for most of the book of 1 Nephi. That book begins in Jerusalem, a known place with a known history. It is linked to the Babylonian conquest, which is known and dated in non-biblical sources. The overall directions of travel are given in the text, and importantly, there is a named place that fits in both time, space, and text with archaeological evidence.

The book *Into Arabia*¹ collects several articles published at different times and in different venues (one from *BYU Studies* and the rest from *Interpreter*). This volume examines different aspects of the research into this most promising archaeological connection between the Book of Mormon and the known Old World setting. It is very much a response to the idea that there is no archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon.

This volume is specific, detailed, and comprehensive. Even though each article is available separately, there is great convenience in collecting them in one place. It makes it easier for most of us to discover anew this important elucidation of the best-known geographical information available for the Book of Mormon. An additional subliminal advantage is that the collected articles are presented generally in the order of the journey, allowing for a greater conceptualization of the whole that is created by the sum of the ordered chapters.

Chapter 1: Lehi and Sariah's Escape from Jerusalem

In the first chapter, Warren Aston suggests that: "The unfolding of Nephi's detailed travel account in recent decades, showing that plausible real-world locations exist for the journey he recorded, should engender confidence as we consider the other events and settings he describes" (p. 3). He begins with a note on the tents the family took on their journey (1 Nephi 2:4). He uses that information to note that transporting those tents required the use of camels, and that the use of camels forms one of the types of evidence available for determining the route the family took as they left Jerusalem and headed toward the Red Sea (p. 4).

There have been multiple theories presented for the route that the Lehiters took from Jerusalem to the Red Sea. Each is viable in that it is legitimately a historical path. The question becomes one of selecting

1. Warren P. Aston, Godfrey J. Ellis, and Neal Rappleye, *Into Arabia: Anchoring Nephi's Account in the Real World* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2024), interpreterfoundation.org/books/into-arabia/.

among the possibilities that best fit the data. It is at this point that Aston demonstrates that his assertion that Nephi left a detailed travel account is modified. There is enough information that external information can be tested against the text, but the text itself cannot be the deciding factor. When Aston argues for his preferred route, through the Negev wilderness, much of the argumentation is based on how the known geography and topography would have affected the travelers—information imputed to the text and not extracted from the text. That is not to say that Aston's analysis is incorrect. It is simply noting that he was a little too expansive in his attribution of detail to Nephi's account.

After suggesting the route from Jerusalem to the Red Sea, now more commonly referred to as the Gulf of Aqaba, he turns to the camp in the valley of Lemuel. He notes that this is likely not on the shore, as it is logical that Nephi would have clearly described a shore encampment as he later did with Bountiful. Aston provides a background on the previous suggestions for the location of the valley, and he explains that he conducted on-the-ground research to see if there were alternatives. He settles on Wadi Tayyib al-Isim, which has been previously suggested. Aston's contributions are in his discussion of the nature of the river in the valley. He notes that while a previous commenter had suggested that there were very few perennial streams in this area, there is, indeed, only one and it is found in Wadi Tayyib al-Isim (p. 22). Aston also provides evidence that wear patterns on the granite valley walls suggests that there was once a much larger and consistent flow of water to create that erosion pattern (pp. 26–28). Unfortunately, there is no way to know if that erosion was due to a continuous flow in Lehi's time. It is perhaps plausible, but it is currently beyond the evidence.

Chapter 2: Nephi's Eight Years in the "Wilderness"

In spite of the excellent clues Nephi left that help identify the Lehitese journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful, there is one problem that Nephi created with no obvious answer—he indicates that they spent "many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 17:4). The problem with that statement is that a journey covering the distance and general location they covered should only take months, not a year. Certainly not eight years.

In the second chapter, Godfrey Ellis examines those eight years and begins by looking at what the text might have meant by "wilderness." He suggests:

The alternative reading for Nephi's comment is that the word *wilderness* might not have referred only to a desert environment, but to any undeveloped area. If that is the case, then the eight years "in the wilderness" could have *included* the time spent in the lush but uninhabited oasis/inlet of Bountiful. If the concept of *wilderness* could include more habitats than just a desert, that would change everything. Most specifically, it would allow Nephi's eight years to represent the *total time* on the Arabian Peninsula, not just the time from leaving Jerusalem to entering Bountiful. (p. 34)

Ellis makes a good case for a more open reading of the text rather than the assumptive literalist reading that may try to extract more data than is available in the travel statement. Allowing the eight years to cover the entire journey makes some sense, but of course still doesn't explain the eight years.

What Ellis does is to spread the delays across the various stops. By including the time in Bountiful and what might be needed to build a ship from scratch, it creates a much longer time than would be required simply by travel. I state that fully realizing that my sentence is so dramatically reductive that it really ignores much of the value of Ellis's chapter. Much of the value lies in the detailed analysis of events, people, and places that lead to the longer timeframe. This is a chapter rich in detailed examinations. One of them that should be required reading is Ellis's reading of Laman and Lemuel, which contradicts the all-too-easy interpretation of the brothers as evil.

Chapter 3: Nephi's Shazer

In the first chapter of *Into Arabia*, Warren Aston discussed the evidence supporting a real-world location for the valley of Lemuel. Linked to that location is the information that leads to this chapter, a discussion of a real-world location for the location of Shazer. Here Aston begins with an examination of the meaning of the name. The two proposals, from Sperry (*twisting* and *intertwining*) and Nibley (*trees*) are examined. Nothing about the region fits a description of twisting and intertwining, leading Aston to accept Nibley's suggestion that it meant "trees." With that touchpoint, Aston suggests:

the leading candidate for Shazer is notable for three reasons: its distance from the valley of Lemuel, its proximity to mountains where game could be hunted, and its profusion

of trees. All these features can be readily discerned in satellite imagery, although they are best appreciated at ground level. (p. 111)

The chapter examines previous proposals and settles on the identification made by George Potter and Richard Wellington. They suggested Wadi Agharr, now commonly called Wadi esh Sharma. Aston discusses the reasons that this region fits the requirements and concludes: "Shazer can now be identified with a high degree of certainty" (p. 124).

Chapter 4: The Nahom Convergence Reexamined

It was Hugh Nibley who first suggested that "the place which was called Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:34) was likely a location that already had that name when the Lehite entourage arrived. That suggestion appeared to have been corroborated by the discovery of altars indicating that there was such a place, and that it existed during Lehi's lifetime. That link between place and text would be the closest thing possible (besides, of course, Jerusalem) to an archaeologically demonstrated tie between the Book of Mormon and the world it describes.

That correlation has not come without challenge. A principal contraindication is that the connection is derived from Semitic texts that do not use vowels. Hence, finding NHM might mean Nahom, but also could be other words, including words more likely in the language of those who created the inscriptions.

The potential of Nahom and the best-attested convergence between known history and the Book of Mormon is therefore extremely important to understanding the historicity of the Book of Mormon text. Chapter 4, Neal Rappleye's contribution to *Into Arabia*, is currently the standard for the accumulation of evidence supporting that correlation.

Rappleye begins with the history of the linguistic issues, emphasizing the plausibility of the reading of *Nahom* for the NHM consonants. From that beginning, he dives into the geography and history of the region. Rappleye lays out four elements that he suggests provide the convergences to corroborate the Book of Mormon Nahom with the real world:

1. The plausible route the Lehites would have taken to arrive at Nahom.
2. Nahom as a place of burial.

3. A review of textual details that define the location.
4. An examination of the historical geography of the region.

The examination is detailed and well done. For this particular connection to the Book of Mormon, this discussion is the most comprehensive examination of this historical context of the Old World portion of the Book of Mormon. Including this chapter in *Into Arabia* continues to strengthen the argument that we have solid Old World evidence demonstrating that the Book of Mormon descriptions can be attached to real-world places and times with a high degree of confidence.

Chapter 5: Accessing Nephi's Bountiful

The placement of this chapter by Warren Aston is appropriate for understanding the sequence of the Lehiite journey, but is conceptually dependent upon the next chapter, which discusses the candidates for the Old World Bountiful named in the Book of Mormon. Without an understanding of which location the trail should go to, finding the way it was approached seems like putting the cart before the horse.

While that is technically true of the placement of the chapter, the reader should be assured that the author has an argument for the Bountiful in question. Indeed, the next chapter is also by Aston. In original publication order, the next chapter appeared the year before this one, and this one is built upon it. It should be remembered that the placement in this book is conceptual and not based on original publication dates.

The specifics of this chapter are based upon the identification of Bountiful as Khor Kharfot, in present-day Oman. This chapter examines the two options of how the final destination was reached. As Aston explains, “not all students of Nephi’s journey across Arabia may realize that there are actually two wadis, or river valleys, providing access for the final stage of travel from the interior deserts into Khor Kharfot. Both wadis converge near the beginning of the inlet” (p. 212).

The examination of the two is detailed and the arguments important. While it is a very small portion of the story of the journey of the Lehiites, it is a reminder that these descriptions of the Book of Mormon are sufficient to create a rather explicit map of the path that the Lehiites traveled. Aston concludes:

Realities on the ground—most still visible today—thus continue to inform our quest to probe these sacred records. They bring us closer to a fuller appreciation of what is surely

one of the longest and most consequential journeys in history. Specifics such as the terrain, distances, directions, and so on — embedded in Nephi's text and discussed here — offer further compelling support for it being a history of real people on a real journey. (p. 220)

Chapter 6: Nephi's Bountiful

There have been two proposed candidates for the Old World Bountiful in the Book of Mormon. In this chapter, Warren Aston provides a close examination of the textual evidence and the physical features of the two proposed candidates.

Aston begins, as he should, with the text itself. Most Book of Mormon readers will assume that there is little to go on, but close reading of the text describing the whole of the journey provides clues. Aston begins with the travel from Nahom to Bountiful and then discusses the textual requirements for Bountiful.

Against those requirements, Aston tests the two proposed locations in remarkable detail. In addition to information on the location itself, Aston also provides information on the possibility of shipbuilding in that region, and what kind of ship might have been possible.

Conclusion

Most good reviews provide a critical assessment of the book in question. This review, as indicated at the outset, is more a general assessment of the value of the book rather than a critique. What, then, is the suggested value? Tremendous. For anyone interested in understanding how the Book of Mormon fits into history, it is indispensable. This book provides the best evidence that the criticism that the Book of Mormon has no archaeological evidence is based solely on issues relevant to the New World portion of the text.

The Book of Mormon cannot be split into two different historical issues, however. Regardless of any issues in discussing the historicity of the text after the arrival of the Lehites in the New World, assessment of the convergence between 1 Nephi and its real-world setting is highly detailed and conforms to known geographies, locations, and time periods.



Brant A. Gardner *did his undergraduate work at Brigham Young University. He received a Master's in Anthropology from the State University of New York at Albany, specializing in Mesoamerican ethnohistory. He is an executive editor for Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship. He is the author of the six-volume Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, as well as Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon As History and The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon. His most recent books are Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper: Textual and Narrative Structures of the Book of Mormon and The Plates of Mormon: A Book of Mormon Study Edition Based on Textual and Narrative Structures in the English Translation, each published by Kofford Books. Gardner has also contributed a Book of Mormon Minute to the ScripturePlus app, a condensed commentary on two or three verses at a time from the Book of Mormon.*

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.