

Nahom: A Keystone of Faith or a Case of Mistaken Identity?

An evidence-based analysis of the Book of Mormon's most prominent archaeological claim.

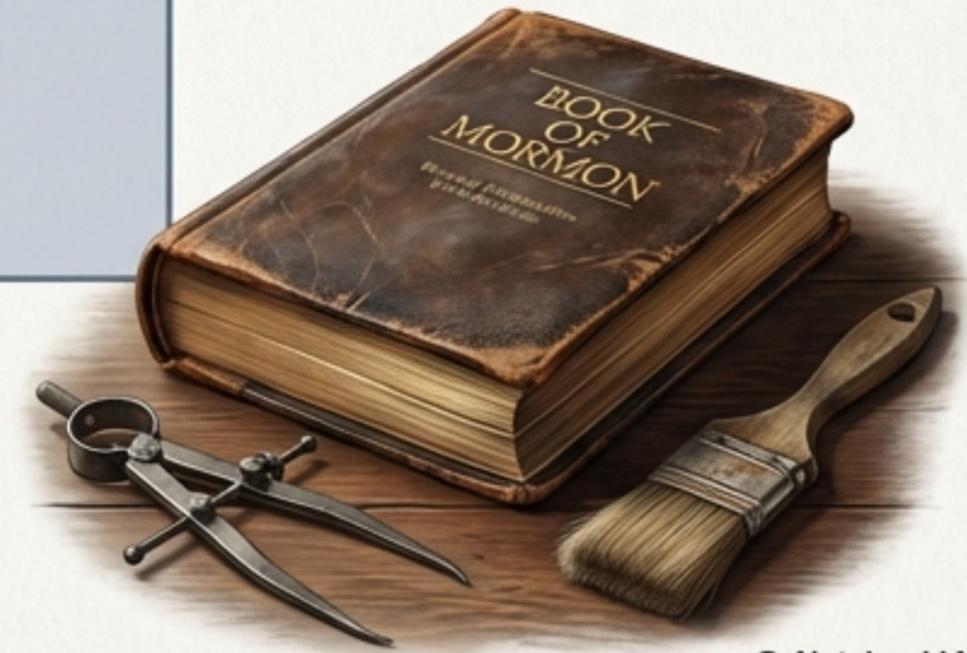


The “First Actual Archaeological Evidence”

For decades, the story of “**Nahom**” has been presented as the strongest external evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Apologists position it as a “**bullseye**”—a specific, verifiable detail that Joseph Smith could not possibly have known in 1829.

“These altars’ inscriptions constitute the **first actual archaeological evidence** for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.”

— Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (2002)



The Apologetic Claim, Stated Powerfully

An ancient burial site named Nahom, matching the Book of Mormon's "NHM," was discovered exactly where the text indicated, confirming a detail Joseph Smith could not have known.

"...The issue of where Nahome was located is **basically settled** on the basis of three inscriptions..."

— S. Kent Brown, BYU Professor of Ancient Scripture



"...an ancient burial site that's mentioned in First Nephi called Nahom... has since been discovered **exactly where the Book of Mormon said it would be.**"

— Jim Bennett, Apologist

Four Pillars of the of the Nahom Argument

To be considered a legitimate historical “hit,” the archaeological find must align with the Book of Mormon narrative on four key points. Let’s examine each one based on the available evidence.



1. The Location

Is the site “in the borders near the Red Sea”?



2. The Function

Was it a “burial place” for Ishmael?



3. The Name

Does the “NHM” inscription refer to the place “Nahom”?



4. The Context

Does the surrounding history align with the narrative?

Pillar 1: Re-examining the Location

The Text's Claim

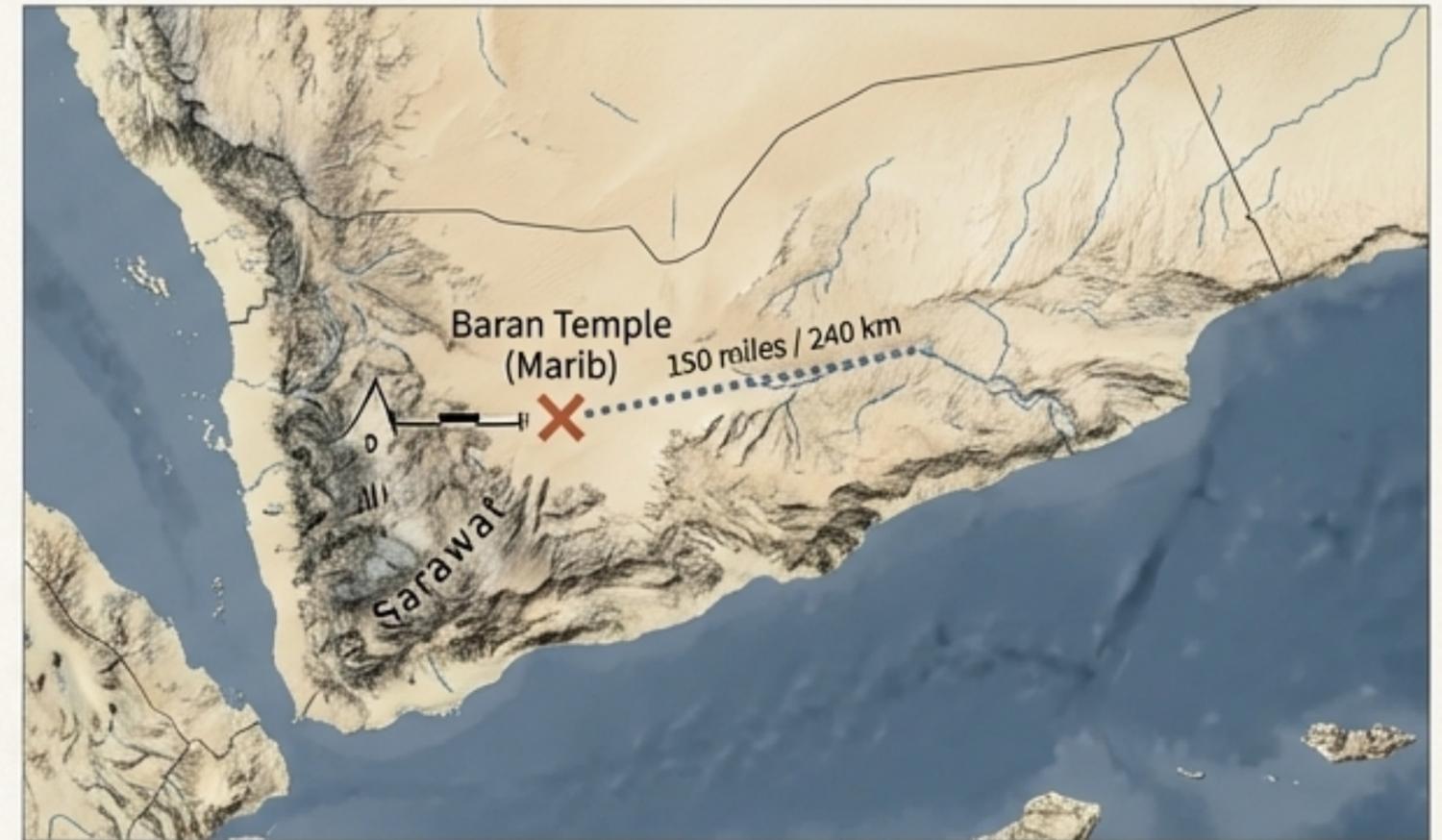
“...keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders **near the Red Sea.**” (1 Nephi 16)



Apologetic Representation (via Scripture Central)

The Geographical Reality

- The proposed site (Baran Temple) is **150 miles inland** from the Red Sea.
- A massive mountain range separates the site from the sea.



Pillar 2: A Burial Site or a Pagan Temple?

The Apologetic Claim

Nahom was the “burial place” where Ishmael was interred.



The Archaeological Fact

- The artifacts were found at the **Baran Temple**, a major sanctuary of the Sabaean kingdom.
- It was dedicated to the moon god **Al-Maqqā**.
- It functioned as a center for worship and a state archive, **not a burial ground**.



Reconstruction of the Baran Temple, Marib, Yemen.

Pillar 3: What the Inscription Actually Says

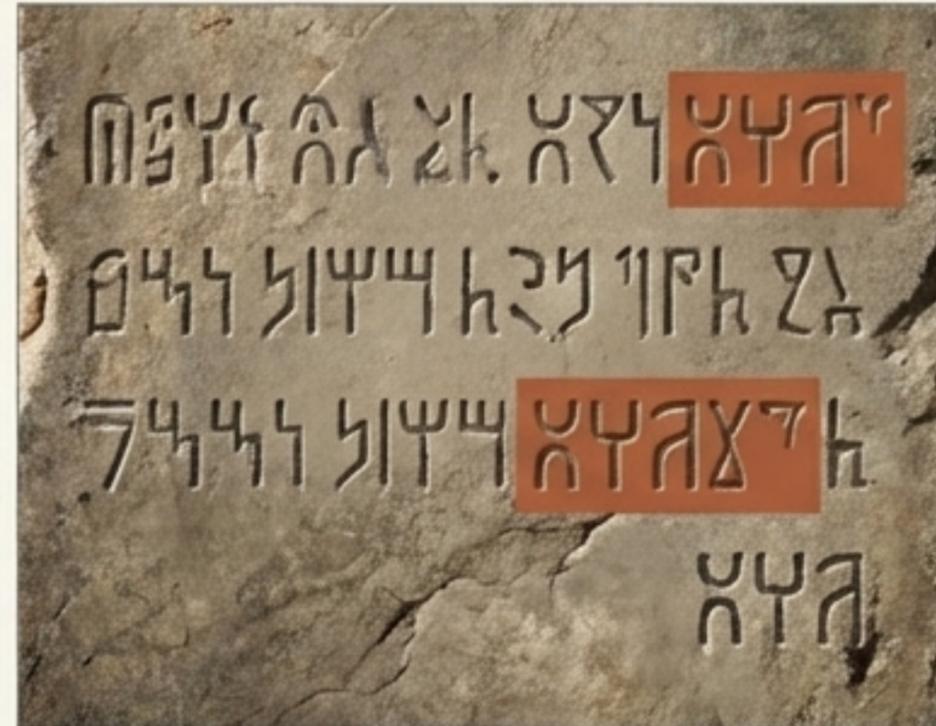
The Focus

The entire argument hinges on three consonants: NHM. Apologetic presentations isolate these letters. But what happens when we read the entire inscription?



The Context

A photorealistic rendering of the complete four-line South Arabic inscription on the complete the South Arabic inscription on the eltrer name of the altar.



Bi'athar, son of Sawadum, son of Naw'am, **the Nihmite**, has dedicated to Ilmaqqaḥ the... [full text launchorn the spond into the nhmils of translation of the saltr of the Arabic sea.

Key Insight: The inscription identifies the donor's *tribal affiliation* ('the Nihmite'), not the name of the location.

The “Parisian in New York” Problem

Claiming the Baran Temple was named ‘Nahom’ because a ‘Nihmite’ man left an altar there is like:

Finding an artifact in New York City donated by ‘a Parisian’ and concluding that the ancient name of New York was Paris.



- * The inscription is in **South Arabic**, not the Hebrew that Lehi’s family would have spoken.
- * The three letters “**NHM**” constitute **less than 5%** of the total consonants on the altar.

Pillar 4: The Silence of the Narrative

If Lehi's group passed through this region, **they would have been at the heart** of the powerful Sabaean Kingdom, centered in Marib.



Jerusalem, c. 600 BCE

~25,000



Marib, c. 600 BCE

~50,000



The Omission: The Book of Mormon, a detailed record of the family's journey and struggles, makes no mention of encountering this major population center, its people, or its distinct religion.

If Not a Prophetic Bullseye, Then What?



The claim that Joseph Smith couldn't have known the name 'Nahom' assumes it had no presence in his 19th-century environment. An examination of sources available to him suggests a more plausible origin.



1. Contemporary Cartography (Maps)

2. Biblical and Theological Texts

Plausible Source 1: The Name Was on the Map

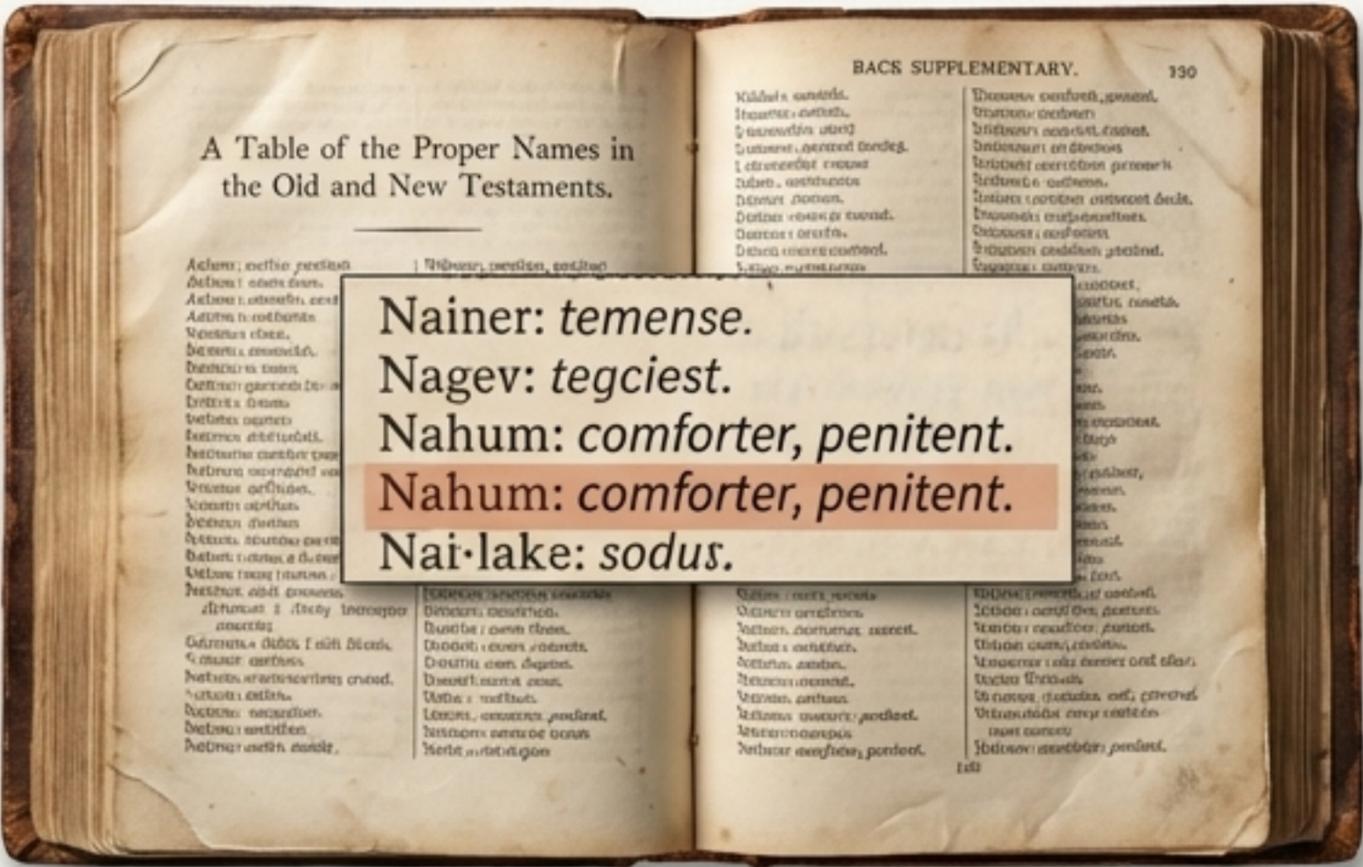
Contrary to apologetic claims, the tribal name ‘Nehem’ or ‘Nhem’ appeared on multiple European maps of the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th and early 19th centuries. At least **seven different maps published between 1751 and 1813**—available during Joseph Smith’s lifetime—included this name.



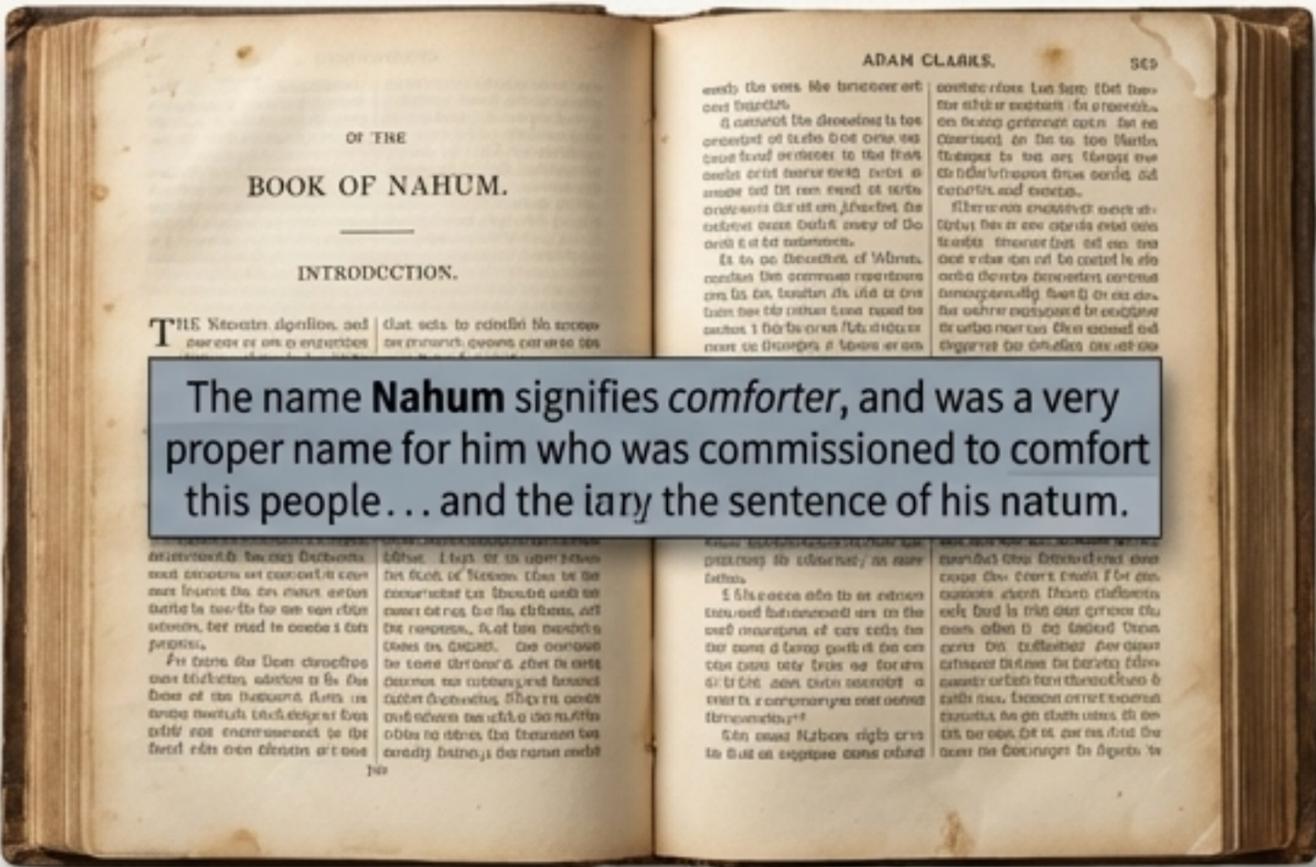
Detail from Carsten Niebuhr’s “Arabia,” 1794

Plausible Source 2: The Name Was in His Bible

Joseph Smith did not need an obscure map to find a name with the consonants N-H-M.



Early 19th century King James Bible, back supplementary



Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary, early 1800s

1. **The Book of Nahum:** An Old Testament book.
2. **Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary:** A popular resource Joseph Smith likely used.
3. **Bible Name Lists:** Included in Bibles of the era.

Weighing the Evidence: Claim vs. Reality

| The Apologetic Claim | The Scholarly Evidence |
|--|--|
| A burial site called “Nahom.” | A pagan temple for the moon god Al-Maqqā. |
| Located “near the Red Sea.” | 150 miles inland, beyond a massive mountain range. |
| Name proven by “ NHM ” inscription. | “NHM” refers to a person’s <i>tribe</i> (“the Nihmite”), not a place. |
| A direct chronological hit for c. 600 BCE. | The temple’s construction is ~400 years older (10th c. BCE). |
| The narrative is historically accurate. | It omits a city (Marib) twice the population of Jerusalem. |
| The name was unknowable to Joseph Smith. | The name appears in the Bible and on 7+ maps from his era. |

Two Competing Explanations

The Principle of Parsimony (Occam's Razor) suggests that the simplest explanation with the most explanatory power and fewest unsupported assumptions is often the correct one.

Hypothesis A: The Miraculous

An angel, golden plates, seer stone translation, and a prophetically revealed name that happens to loosely match a tribal identifier found at a pagan temple far from where the text implies.



Hypothesis B: The Mundane

A 19th-century author, steeped in the Bible, created a story using a name he encountered directly from scripture, popular commentaries, or contemporary maps.

The Quality of Evidence

The purpose of this analysis is not to challenge faith, but to evaluate the strength of a historical claim.

The 'Nahom' argument, presented as the strongest archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon, appears convincing only when a significant amount of contradictory archaeological, textual, and historical context is ignored.

The evidence does not have to be attacked; it only has to be read in its entirety.