Book of Mormon Central

The Nahom Convergence

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The Nahom Convergence: An Addendum to our Response to Dan Vogel

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In our recent article, "Book of Mormon Minimalists and the NHM Inscriptions: A Response to Dan Vogel," we argued that Dan Vogel and others have not fully accounted for the all evidence pointing to a connection between the Book of Mormon *Nahom* and the south Arabian tribal area of *Nihm*. In the comments on our article, Vogel has suggested that the Nahom/Nihm correlation is that same as the Cumorah/Comora (Islands) coincidence.

> The coincidence of a similar name isn't a slam-dunk, and given the absence of a direct connection of the BOM to ancient America one should be cautious not too overstate such nebulous connections. I give the same criticism to skeptics who think they have evidence that Joseph Smith wrote the BOM in the discovery that Captain Kidd sailed his pirate ship among the Comora Islands, the capitol town of the largest Island being Moroni. One needs more than interesting coincidences in names to produce convincing historical evidence. Incidentally, Nihm is to Nahom as Comora is to Cumorah. The question is: Am I minimizing this evidence or are Rappleye and Smoot trying to minimize the problems?

While insinuating that we are just "trying to minimize the problems," in a later comment he admits to being mistaken about the dating of NHM, and probably on Jewish burial practices as well.[1] Thus, at the very least, it seems two of the problems are not really problems at all. Nonetheless, Vogel comments:

> My skepticism in both matters is well founded, for it is well known that most people grossly underestimate the odds for coincidence and often improperly assign meaning to such chance occurrences. What are the odds that out of the hundreds of place names in the BOM that one would pose an interesting or surprising correlation? Higher than you assume, obviously, which is the reason for my Comora-Moroni example. … More is needed to move this interesting pattern in your data set and make it compelling evidence for BOM historicity. Ignoring the hundreds of unconfirmed cities and focusing on this one vague and problematic example is nothing to get excited about.

Of course, we certainly do not mean to say that Nahom/Nihm, by itself, can settle the question of Book of Mormon historicity, and what constitutes "compelling evidence" is always, to some

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[1] In one of the comments to our article, Vogel reluctantly concedes, "It seems that I erred on the dating of the altars and possibly the avoidance of heathen burial grounds, which after a decade I'm unsure why." While we appreciate that Vogel was willing to concede his errors, we're afraid that this is something of an understatement. In fact, the evidence overwhelmingly contradicts Vogel, particularly on the dating of the altars (which Vogel incorrectly dated a millennium too late).

degree, in the eye of the beholder. Still, we feel that Vogel is seriously downplaying the evidence that suggests a connection between Nahom and Nihm.

We agree with Vogel that "coincidence of a similar name isn't a slam-dunk," but as we tried to stress in our article, there is more going on than merely a similarity in names here. While some might quibble about the exact route taken from the arrival point at the Red Sea, or it being in "exactly" the right place (a claim we never made in our article), it is nevertheless true that getting to Nihm from the northern region near the Red Sea requires one to travel in a generally south-southeastern direction, that eastward travel becomes possible at the Nihm area, and that there is a fertile area eastward of Nihm that fits the description of Bountiful.

When it comes to matters of probability, there are a number of factors to consider. Vogel points out that there remain hundreds of toponyms unconfirmed in the Book of Mormon. Rick Grunder, another critic, also raises this point, along with others.

> Certainly, we will not turn away from the obvious Book of Mormon defense point that the word "Nahom" is not merely compatible with known ancient sounds: it also corresponds geographically to a likely ancient counterpart in the Book of Mormon story. But how many hundred other locations existed along any proposed Lehi route through Arabia, for which Joseph Smith might have happened to come up with the same three consonants in order, instead of this particular example? And in the entire Book of Mormon saga of a thousand years and more—through two hemispheres—is it not fair that Joseph Smith should get one place name right—at least its consonants?[2]

Grunder thus makes two points: (1) that there are hundreds on names along the route Lehi is supposed to have traveled, any of which Joseph Smith might have happened to come up with a similar sounding name; and (2) the same point made by Vogel: that with all the names in the Book of Mormon, surely Joseph Smith was bound to get one right. Before we grant that all these names increase the probability of coincidence, however, we have some questions.

1. It is certainly true that there are hundreds of names along the routes south-southeast in Arabia. One of the 18th century maps on which the name *Nehhm* can be found, for instance, is covered "from end to end, with so many locations filling the coast that there is scarcely room for all the names to be printed in some areas."[3] But what if the name that appeared in the narrative had been similar to one of those many different locations? What if it had been a name that was closer to the Gulf of Aqaba, or somewhere else along the northern part of the trail? What if it had been an Arabian name that is on the east coast, by the Persian Gulf instead? Or what if it had even been a name that was just a hundred or so

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[2] Rick Grunder, *Mormon Parallels: A Bibliographic Source* (LaFayette, New York: Rick Grunder – Books, 2008), 1054.

[3] Grunder, *Mormon Parallels*, 1058. It should be noted that Grunder, although pointing out that one map focuses on the southwest corner and features *Nehhm* quite prominently (1058), seems to agree that it is unlikely that Joseph Smith ever saw any of these maps (see 1052–1053).

miles to the north or south of Nihm, and thus being several days off from where eastward travel becomes possible? In each of these scenarios, the similarity in name becomes less interesting, if not totally irrelevant. This is why, as we pointed out in our article, the placement of Nahom/Nihm adds to the significance of the correlation.

2. The fact that there are hundreds of names along the route in late 18th century maps and travel books, however, tells us nothing about whether all of those places were there ca. 600 BC. This is a point critics were quick to make before the altar discoveries attesting to the name in Lehi's day. Recall that even Vogel (mistakenly) raised the issue of dating NHM. It seemed significant to critics *before* it was confirmed to date to Book of Mormon times, why are they so eager to downplay the issue of dating now? Warren P. Aston points out, "Documenting a tribal name and location back some three thousand years is, of course, rare anywhere in the world; it is likely unprecedented in Arabian archaeology."[4] Because the dating of Nihm is part of the correlation, any discussion of possible coincidence needs to draw its numbers from the pool of Arabian place names that can be confidently dated to the timeframe of the 1 Nephi narrative. How many places names can be confirmed from inscriptions dating to the 6th century BCE and earlier? Does this make our potential name pool larger or smaller? And remember, the name cannot just occur on an inscription. We need to be able to identify its actual location as well. We're going to hazard a guess that this will likely reduce size of the potential name pool, and subsequently reduce the probability of chance.

3. There are 337 names in the Book of Mormon, 188 of which are unique to the Book of Mormon.[5] If we are going to imagine that Joseph Smith fabricated the text, then unless a compelling reason can be demonstrated as to why he used the names the way he did, it must be assumed that these proper nouns in the Book of Mormon are arbitrary. Hence, "Nahom," the only NHM name in the whole text, could have theoretically appeared anywhere in the text. It could have been the Nephite capital instead of Zarahemla, for instance. Or it could have been a Jaredite name. It also could have been personal name instead of place name (which, if Joseph Smith were getting the name from the Bible, as Vogel suggested, would seem more likely, since the only a similar names in the Bible are personal names). What if it had been Nahom who died and got buried at Ishmael? As we pointed out in our article, there is only one NHM name in the whole Book of Mormon. While Nahom could have theoretically ended up being anywhere in the whole Book of Mormon, in any context, it ended up in 1 Nephi, as the only name in that book which appears to have pre-dated Lehi's arrival,[6] situated in a way that reasonably matches the

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[4] Warren P. Aston, "A History of NaHoM," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51/2 (2012): 93.

[5] Paul Y. Hoskission, "Book of Mormon Names," in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillian Publishing, 1992), 1:186–187.

[6] In comments elsewhere, Vogel has disputed the argument that the use of the passive voice in 1 Nephi 16:34 implies that there was already toponym there. Vogel writes, "Just because a place has a name doesn't imply people live there. Lehi's group had named several places before Nahom, but no one argues that people lived there. Lehi just had a habit of naming places without anyone there. Just because Nahom appears in the passive voice doesn't prove anything. It doesn't say by whom. ... Now, if it said 'which was called by the inhabitants Nahom,' then that would mean something.

Nihm region, and where the narrative context works very well with a wordplay on the Hebrew *nḥm*.[7] The way all these details come together in the text needs to be a part of any equation trying to assess the probability of coincidence.

As it is, it means nothing." Certainly, since the argument is that it *implies* the presence of others, it is not air-tight and there are other ways to interpret it. Still, we feel that the more common interpretation among LDS scholars is more compelling. It is true that Lehi freely names places as he travels—a feature that is authentic in its own right (see Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* [Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 74–76)—but as we pointed out, in every other instance, this is done in the active voice, and that Lehi is doing the naming is explicit (see 1 Nephi 2:8; 16:13; 17:5). Why is Nahom the only one that does not follow this formula— and only a few verses before and after other occurrences of the active voice? Vogel would have us believe that this single change in voice is an arbitrary change made by Joseph Smith. Others, ourselves included, argue that the change *means* something—namely, that Lehi did not give this name, but instead learned, from others, that this is what the place was called. We will let readers decide for themselves which interpretation has the most explanatory power, but in our view Vogel has just offered yet another minimalist reading (again, what's not explicit in the text must not be there) that does little to explain what we actually see going on in the text.

[7] On another public forum, Vogel makes this comment regarding the suggested wordplay: "We must accept the ancient origin for the BOM to accept their speculation that Nephi intentionally changed Nihm to Nahom to make a play on the word. … The authors seem to think NHM on the altars somehow explains why Nephi would feel free to use his Hebrew word. Nephi didn't see the altars or sign post with the name on; he supposedly spoke to a people who would have pronounced it correctly. So our authors need to explain why Nephi would say the place "was called Nahom," when it wasn't even according to their own theory."

First, the idea that there *could* have been a wordplay need not assume antiquity. According to John Gee, one way scholars try to determine the original language of a document "is to look for word plays that work in the source language but not in the target language." (John Gee, "La Trahison des Clercs: On the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 [1994]: 80.) The point is that the proper noun, Nahom, occurs in a narrative context that fits meanings and themes associated with Hebrew *nḥm*. As we point out above, it could have ended up in *any* context, if Joseph Smith were making this up, but it occurs in the right context for the word play. Such seems significant.

Next, we presume no such interaction between Nephi and the altars. It is true that S. Kent Brown proposed that Nephi may have used the Hebrew *nḥm* in place of the south Arabian place name, a suggestion which we pointed out could not be invalidated by the fact that the Book of Mormon Nahom has a soft H in English. But Brown bases his view on the idea that Nephi *heard* the name, not read it on the altars. He explains the reason as possibly "reminding them of God's comfort." (S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch [Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002], 83.) If, in fact, Nephi substituted the Hebrew word, perhaps to make the wordplay stronger or more explicit, it would not be unlike the authors of the Hebrew Bible, who substituted *Nebuchadnezzer* in place of *Nebuchadrezzer* to make insinuations about the Babylonian king, although Nephi's change would have had more positive connotations.

Nonetheless, there need not be a word substitution in order for there to be a wordplay. The word play depends on themes in the text. Just as the Hebrew *Ḥām* was not replaced with the Egyptian *ḥm* in Genesis 9 and 10, neither must the south Arabian NHM have been replaced by the Hebrew *nḥm*. Rather, just as Gary A. Rendsberg suggested that the narratives of Genesis 9 and 10 are constructed in such a way as to call to mind the Egyptian meanings of *ḥm* (which word never appears in the text itself), Nephi could have constructed his narrative in such a way as to evoke the meanings of the Hebrew *nḥm*, though the term itself may not have even been in the text itself. That the Hebrew and south Arabian terms do not sound exactly alike is no more relevant than the fact the Hebrew and Egyptian terms in Rendsberg's proposal do not sound exactly alike. The *similar* sounding name, combine with the narrative themes, "work together in the pericope to produce the desired effect," to quote from Rendsberg again. (Gary A. Rendsburg, "Word Play in Biblical Hebrew: An Eclectic Collection," in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, ed. Scott B. Noegel [Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2000], 145.) Hence, Nephi may have just written the name of the south Arabian place, which would have just been the characters equivalent to NHM in whatever script he was writing with, and then proceeded to craft a narrative around that name which was meant to evoke to his readers, whom he assumed would know Hebrew, *nḥm*.

4. In pointing out that none of the ancient American places in the Book of Mormon have been confirmed, both Vogel and Grunder are not only creating a red herring,[8] but they are also ignoring the major complications that undermine the very expectation that we should be able to find such names. The vast majority of known Mesoamerican sites have never even been excavated,[9] there is a lack of readable texts dating back to Book of Mormon times, and discontinuity of toponyms also means that very few names from Book of Mormon times are confirmed.[10] Any fair assessment of the probability of coincidence should fairly take these matters into account. The fact that the vast majority of Book of Mormon toponyms cannot reasonably be confirmed by archaeology—by chance or otherwise— would seem to reduce the odds of a correlation between a Book of Mormon name and the name, place, and date of an ancient site from happening at random.

None of this means that the correlation between Nahom and Nihm could not be pure chance, but the point is the question is fairly complicated. No one, at present, can pretend to know what the odds of such a coincidence would be, as no rigorous statistical study has been conducted. In the meantime, however, we can try to study this issue the same way other scholars have in trying to understand how (or even *if*) any given text converges with archaeological remains.

In doing such for the Bible, William G. Dever has used a method of "convergences," which is when the data in a text and the data in the archaeological record come together. As explained by Dever, "Whenever the two sources or 'witnesses' [texts and external sources] happen to converge in their testimony, a historical 'datum' (or given) may be said to have been established beyond reasonable doubt. To ignore or to deny the implications of such convergent testimony is irresponsible

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[8] When Vogel speaks of "the absence of a direct connection of the BOM to ancient America," or "the hundreds of unconfirmed cities," he is not really addressing the evidence at hand, but instead appealing to the supposed lack of evidence on other topics in an effort to draw attention away from subject under investigation. It will likely not surprise Vogel to learn that we do not feel like the NHM altars are the only evidence for the Book of Mormon, and disagree with his characterization of the lack of evidence. It was obviously never the intent of our original paper, nor this further response, to "prove" the Book of Mormon is ancient, or to lay out *all* the evidence for its authenticity. Rather, we sought only to respond to his attempt at minimizing, or dismissing, the correlation between NHM and Nahom *as evidence* in favor of the Book of Mormon. The moment the response becomes an appeal to the supposed lack of *other* evidence, is the moment the evidence at hand has been conceded; it is a slight-of-hand attempt to move the argument to where he feels he has stronger ground.

[9] See Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, "*Ein Heldenleben*? On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 193; Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrom: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd edition (Redding, Calif: FairMormon, 2013), 80–81; Victor Hernandes-Jayme, "2013 Maya Meetings held at U[niversity of] T[exas]: New temples, fire glyphs and legends," *Daily Texan*, January 22, 2013, online at http://www.dailytexanonline.com/news/2013/01/22/2013-maya-meetings-held-at-ut-new-temples-fire-glyphs-and-legends (accessed January 31, 2014), brackets in title ours, for clarification.

[10] See William J. Hamblin, "Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 170-197; also see Brant A. Gardner, "Behind the Mask, Behind the Curtain: Uncovering the Illusion," *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 145-195; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008) 1:337. Mesoamerican archaeologist Mark A. Wright has noted that "of those 6,000 or so known Maya sites, we only know the ancient names of about a dozen of them, which leaves roughly 5,988 sites whose names are simply lost to history. And that's just from the Maya area, to say nothing of the rest of Mesoamerica." Mark A. Wright, e-mail correspondence with the authors (February 4, 2014).

scholarship, since it impeaches the testimony of one witness without reasonable cause by suppressing other vital evidence."[11]

In the Book of Mormon, Nahom appears as a locality in the early 6th century BCE where, coming from Jerusalem, a party must travel generally south-southeast along or near the Red Sea, going through "most fertile parts" and then "more fertile parts" to arrive there (1 Nephi 16:13–16, 33).[12] It is a place where a deceased love one is buried (1 Nephi 16:34), and from there you can travel generally eastward (1 Nephi 17:1), where there is a fertile coastal region with a number (12, in fact) of its own textual details.

In Arabia, "the Nihm region, west of Mārib," is dated to the "7th–6th centuries BC,"[13] and can be reached from northern regions, like Jerusalem, by traveling generally south-southeast, along a route that roughly parallels the Red Sea, where the northern parts are the most fertile, while the central area is more fertile than regions further south.[14] At Nihm, there is a large ceremonial burial grounds, and the tribe seems to have been renown in the area for the stone work they did in constructing the tombs there.[15] From Nihm, trails branch out eastward as travel in an easterly direction is impossible before reaching that area.[16] Almost exactly eastward from Nihm is a fertile coastal region that meets all the identified criteria for Bountiful.[17]

Without even mentioning the similarity in place name, we can see a convergence between Nahom in the text, and Nihm in Arabia. The convergence between Nahom and Nihm is, in our estimation, as compelling as any that Dever brings up for the Bible. What reasonable cause does Vogel have to minimize it? Dever goes on to explain that "to overturn that would require a more *likely* scenario, replete with new and superior independent witnesses."[18] What *more likely* scenario to explain the convergence has been offered by Vogel (or anyone else)? What "new and superior" evidence can they counter with?

Vogel compares it to the Cumorah/Comora correlation, and adds in one of his comments, "Trying to bolster the coincidence of similar names by reference to Bountiful, which was known in Joseph

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[11] William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 107.

[12] They only way these can be "*most* fertile" and "*more* fertile" is if (a) the first has greater fertility than the second, and (b) there is yet another region that has even less fertility than the second, hence it is "more" fertile.

[13] St John Simpson, ed., *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen* (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 166.

[14] See George Potter and Richard Willington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New, Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2003), 90–98; George Potter and Richard Willington, "Lehi's Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi's Harbor," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 30–32.

[15] Aston, "A History of NaHoM," 83–84.

[16] S. Kent Brown, "New Light: Nahom and the 'Eastward' Turn," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/ 1 (2003): 111–12.

[17] See Warren P. Aston, "Arabian Bountiful Discovered? Evidence for Nephi's Bountiful," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 4–11. Also see Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 124–34; Wm. Revell Phillips, "Mughsayl: Another Candidate for Land Bountiful," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/2 (2007): 48–59. Then there is Aston's summary of the three proposals: Warren P. Aston, "Identifying Our Best Candidate for Nephi's Bountiful," *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 17/1–2 (2008): 58–64.

[18] Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know*, 108.

Smith's day, is like the critics pointing to Moroni as the capitol of Comora and that it was the place where JS's favorite pirate hung out."[19] But is this really the same? Do the Comoros Islands reasonably converge with the 13 criteria for Cumorah as described in the Book of Mormon?[20] Does the *city* Moroni somehow converge with what is known from the Book of Mormon of the *person* Moroni? The Nahom/Bountiful correlation to real places is nothing like the simple occurrence of these two names (Comora/Moroni) that happen to be similar to those found in the Book of Mormon.

With all of this in mind, remember that Vogel feels that his skepticism is "well founded." But according to Dever, after a convergence is demonstrated, "In the absence of that [i.e., better evidence for an alternative scenario] skepticism is not warranted, and indeed is suspect. The skeptic may remain a 'hostile witness,' but such a witness is overruled, and the case may be considered sufficiently established by all reasonable historical requirements."[21]

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[19] Regarding the claim that a knowledge of a place like Bountiful "was known in Joseph Smith's day," this has, to our knowledge, never been documented. According to Aston, "A History of NaHoM," 90, "knowledge of the Dhofar region's unmatched abundance began to be reported to the outside world only some sixteen years after the publication of the Book of Mormon." We'd be happy to be corrected should Vogel provide some documentation of this claim.

[20] For the criteria for Cumorah, see David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Springville, Utah: Horizon, 1999).

[21] Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know*, 108.