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## Text and History—Part 1: The Case for the Book of Mormon (An Open Letter to Jeremy Runnells)

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# TEXT AND HISTORY—PART I: THE CASE FOR THE BOOK OF MORMON (AN OPEN LETTER TO JEREMY RUNNELLS)

Dear Jeremy Runnells,

Like many others, I have heard your story about the crisis of faith you had a few years ago. I am really sorry to hear about it. I am only a little younger than you are (27 years old), and my story could very easily have been like yours. As a missionary I could be a pretty fundamentalist thinker at times, and often saw things as black and white. I would hear about various criticisms from people I tracted into, and people I taught. I even picked up anti-Mormon writings and read from them as a missionary. For whatever reason, though, the new information did not affect me the way it affected you. I decided that at the time, I just didn't know enough about the things I was reading in those pamphlets to make a sound judgment and decision based on them. And so, I didn't. I stuck to what I knew, and placed those things on the proverbial shelf. Then, when I got home, among other things, I decided to start searching for more information. As I did, I came to find answers, and learned new questions as well, but overall came away with a stronger, more informed, faith. I feel I better understand the gospel now, and I feel compelled to speak up when I think that this gospel I cherish is being attacked. I'll bet that if those who shared negative information with me about the Church knew that it spurred me to take the gospel more seriously, rather than discard it as they had hoped, they would be sorely disappointed.

In any event, I cannot really explain why I reacted as I did and you reacted differently, and I will not attempt to diagnose you or me on that. I can sympathize with the burden that being driven to study this out can become on your personal and family life, as I've seen you talk some about online. I know from personal experience, that I would rather not go into, that it can take its toll on young marriage and family life. I hope things between you and your wife and kids are going well.

With that in mind, however, I do feel compelled to speak up about the contents of your "Letter to a CES Director." As I said, I cherish this gospel. It has been a powerful blessing to my life, and it is something I hope others can share in. When something serves as a roadblock to others being able to feel the love and joy that I do in the gospel, I feel compelled to speak up. Your letter has become just such a roadblock for many, and as such I will not sit idly by as it serves to hurt families and loved ones of those who struggle thanks to your letter. I understand you feel similarly motivated, but from the opposite perspective, so I hope that you can respect where I am coming from.

I have chosen to only focus on the section of your letter that deals with the Book of Mormon. My reasons for doing so are because that is where I have personally devoted the most time to intense

study, but also because it is the “keystone,” a concept I truly believe. If the Book of Mormon is genuinely ancient, then most other issues lose much, if not all, their significance. I may, at another time, choose to write letters to you on other topics in your letter, but for now the Book of Mormon is all I plan to address.

I will respond in two parts. This first part does not actually deal with any of your arguments, but instead focuses on what was *not* in your letter, that is of great significance to interpreting the data you have presented. Namely, it briefly discusses the important matter of methodology, and then it discusses, to a limited extent, positive evidence for the Book of Mormon as historical, evidence that you left out and don’t appear to have engaged (in both cases, I can only summarize for the sake of space—otherwise, I would end up writing a whole book!). Any interpretation of the data that ignores significant counter-evidence is deeply flawed. As such, this negligence must first be corrected before I can discuss what I find wrong with your case against the Book of Mormon.

### Text and History

It must be understood that every text, whether fiction or non-fiction, bears some relationship to history. Even the fictional story has a historical context within which it was composed. Documents of ancient date, or which purport to be of ancient date, must often be carefully studied in any effort to determine just what the text’s relationship to history is. The question of historicity is ultimately about understanding how the text relates to history. The Book of Mormon is no different.

Too often, however, *a priori* assumptions are made about what the relationship should be, or what kind of evidence should be found for that relationship, without understanding the many factors that complicate the process. The arguments made in your letter are based on these kinds of assumptions, and you betray no awareness of the proper methods for examining these relationships. Absent sound methodology, it simply does not matter how much data you collect, or how intense you do your research. Lots of people can gather data. Good, strong interpretation of data is a different story, and requires a solid grasp on methodological issues. And no data or facts speak for themselves—all data must be interpreted. So the question should never just be if the facts are right, nor is it really significant to point out that someone *only* disagrees on the “interpretation.” Since all facts must be interpreted, understanding whether a strong or weak interpretation has been provided is of central concern to evaluating the legitimacy of any arguments or conclusions.

### Methodology

Starting assumptions ultimately are unavoidable, but to help control and regulate (and be open and aware about) them, scholars have developed methods for testing a document’s relationship to history, and there is no reason those methods should not be followed in testing the Book of Mormon. Hugh Nibley explains, “There is only one direction from which any ancient writing

may be profitably approached. *It must be considered in its original ancient setting and in no other.* Only there, if it is a forgery, will its weakness be revealed, and only there, if it is true, can its claims be vindicated.”<sup>1</sup> The reason why the putative ancient setting *must* be our starting point will be explained in part 2. For now, I will briefly summarize the method for doing this.

The most rigorous method for considering a text in its potential original setting is that developed by William G. Dever, a biblical archaeologist. Dever’s method is to look for what he calls “convergences,” which are “points at which the two lines of evidence [the text + external data], when pursued independently and as objectively as possible, appear to point in the same direction and can be projected eventually to meet.”<sup>2</sup>

Whenever the two sources or “witnesses” 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 scholarship, since it impeaches the testimony of one witness without reasonable cause by suppressing other vital evidence.<sup>3</sup>

According to Dever, “to overturn that would require a more *likely* scenario, replete with new and superior independent witnesses.” Dever goes on:

In the absence of that, 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.<sup>4</sup>

So, in the absence of a *better* explanation of the convergence(s), skepticism of historicity is unwarranted. It is this method of convergence that I will apply to the Book of Mormon.

## The Setting

In order to test the text against a historical setting, however, there needs to be a clear setting to test it against. As such, I will limit my case to 1 Nephi, for the following reasons:

- It clearly begins in a known location (Jerusalem), and goes from there along the coast of the Red Sea, placing the narrative in an identifiable location: the Arabian Peninsula. The New World location, on the other hand, is more ambiguous, and often a point of contentious debate.
- It begins with the rise of King Zedekiah to the throne, giving it a definite starting date (597 BC). While there is some debate as to when Lehi actually left Jerusalem, this only

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book/FARMS, 1988), 8.

<sup>2</sup> William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 227, brackets mine.

<sup>3</sup> William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 107.

<sup>4</sup> Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know*, 108, emphasis in original.

makes a difference of about a decade.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the whole narrative falls within the first quarter-century of the 6th century BC, thus giving us a clear time-period. Dating for other parts of the Book of Mormon are not always clear.

- Linguistically, there is not likely to be significant changes or influence from New World languages. Such changes are impossible to trace without having the original text, thus making Mormon's abridgement more complicated to test on linguistic grounds.
- Current limitations in knowledge about pre-Columbian New World archaeology and cultures make much of the New World narrative difficult to test.<sup>6</sup>

All of these factors make the Old World setting for 1 Nephi easier to test than the New World setting for the rest of the book. In your letter, your section on archaeology and the Book of Mormon only talks about the Americas. It says exactly nothing about Arabia. Given that it is the Old World setting that is the most testable, this is a significant oversight.

None of this is to say that there is not some interesting evidence for the Book of Mormon in the New World as well. There are some very interesting convergences between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica. But it is more complicated when we get over there, for reasons that will be discussed in part 2.

That the text purports to be a *translation* of an ancient text also creates limitations that should be accounted for. If it is to be taken seriously as a translation, it should be granted the latitude to manifest the same problems that real translations of real ancient documents tend to have. This includes translator anachronisms and cultural contamination from the translator's milieu. These, too, will be discussed at greater length in part 2.

### Convergences in 1 Nephi

So now, I would simply like to highlight about a dozen (a baker's dozen, actually) convergences between 1 Nephi and its putative historical setting. At least a dozen more could be added, and even those that are included have necessarily been reduced to mere summaries of the total evidence for convergence. In some cases, brevity has required oversimplification. In no case, however, do I feel like I have been dishonest in these oversimplifications.

These convergences are not random, disparate, or loosely connected parallels—they span across the whole book and connect almost the entire narrative to the ancient Near East. Woven together, they ground the entire narrative of leaving Jerusalem and traveling through Arabia in a reality which Joseph Smith could have known little to nothing about.

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<sup>5</sup> Randell P. Spackman, "The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 48–59; S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely, "Jeremiah's Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi's Departure," *Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 15–32.

<sup>6</sup> 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): 161–197; Mark Alan Wright, "The Cultural Tapestry of Mesoamerica," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/2 (2013): 4–21.

**1. Writing of the Egyptians:** Nephi opens with the statement that he is writing in a language system consisting of the “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2). This seems enigmatic, but in fact reflects accurate scribal practices of the day. Several examples of Egyptian writing throughout Israel have been found, many dating to the same time-period as 1 Nephi.<sup>7</sup> Two biblical scholars point out, “Documents from the kingdoms of both Israel and Judah, but not the neighboring kingdoms, of the eighth and seventh centuries [BC] contain Egyptian hieratic signs (cursive hieroglyphics) and numerals that had ceased to be used in Egypt after the tenth century [BC].”<sup>8</sup> John S. Thompson explains why this is significant to Nephi’s statement.

The kind of Egyptian script being employed on those artifacts dating around the time of Lehi is hieratic, but since Demotic was the script of the day in northern Egypt and “abnormal hieratic” was predominant in southern Egypt, the normal hieratic tradition in Canaan must have been adopted from an earlier time—possibly ... during the reigns of David and Solomon or even earlier in the tenth century BC—and was in continued use in Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the evidence “suggests the possibility that by Lehi’s day, scribes having a knowledge of Egyptian had existed in the area for quite some time and had maintained a tradition of writing Egyptian.”<sup>10</sup> In short, the Egyptian language was being written according to an independent scribal tradition (i.e., “the learning of Jews”) in Israel and Judah, which employed a different script (hieratic) than what was then popular in Egypt itself (demotic). One can easily see how writing in hieratic could be said to be writing Egyptian after “the learning of the Jews,” as opposed to writing Egyptian based on the “learning of the Egyptians” (demotic). Thus, Nephi’s writing system perfectly describes now attested scribal practices.

**2. The Prophetic Call Narrative:** The bulk of 1 Nephi 1 consists of Lehi’s prophetic call. Lehi “prayed unto the Lord” for the sake of the people (1 Nephi 1:5), is “overcome with the Spirit” (1 Nephi 1:7), and sees “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels” (1 Nephi 1:8). Lehi sees some members of the divine council descend to earth (see 1 Nephi 1:9–11), is given a heavenly book (see 1 Nephi 1:11) with the commission to deliver the message in the book to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:18, 2:1). Similar examples of this kind of narrative can be found in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1–3, but despite similarities 1 Nephi 1 is quite different from those accounts. In addition, Blake Ostler points out that 1 Nephi 1 includes elements *not found* in the biblical accounts, but known through other ancient Israelite literature. When the patterns found in these other texts are taken into account, 1 Nephi 1 fits into its

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–163.

<sup>8</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 311, brackets mine.

<sup>9</sup> John S. Thompson, “Lehi and Egypt,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 266.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, “Lehi and Egypt,” 267.

claimed context perfectly.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Ostler also compared it against vision and conversion narratives of the 19th century, including that of Joseph Smith's. He concluded:

First Nephi fits better into its claimed historical matrix of preexilic Israel than into a nineteenth-century setting. ... The similarities between the call form as represented in Ezekiel and in 1 Nephi 1 may indicate a similar time period of composition. Those elements common to the pseudepigrapha and 1 Nephi 1 may indicate an awareness of a growing literary tradition that flourished in later Judiasm but which was originally dependent upon the Hebraic prophetic tradition.<sup>12</sup>

**3. Wealthy Northern Israelites in Jerusalem:** One would expect a 19th century text about people living in Jerusalem to use characters from the tribe of Judah. But most of the main characters in 1 Nephi (Laban, Lehi, Ishmael, plus Lehi's sons) are from the house of Joseph (see 1 Nephi 5:14, 16).<sup>13</sup> Plus, Lehi and Laban are obviously wealthy and influential: Lehi seems to have a "land of inheritance" outside the city (1 Nephi 3:16), and Laban is a city official. Just a couple generations prior, Northern Israelites flooded into the southern Kingdom as a result of Assyrian invasions into Israel. Jeffrey R. Chadwick explains:

Though not directly reported in the Bible, a significant number of Israelites appear to have fled the doomed northern kingdom and migrated as refugees to Judah in the south, settling in Jerusalem and other cities of the southern kingdom. ... This refugee movement has been demonstrated by archaeologists who excavated at Judean sites during the 1970s. They discerned unusually large population increases at Jerusalem and other locations from levels dating to the last quarter of the eighth century BC—the exact period of the Assyrian attacks on the northern kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

The region where these refugees settled was called the *Mishneh*. The walls of Jerusalem were expanded to include this region in 701 BC, and economic transformations during the 7th century BC helped the area grow into a flourishing, well-to-do part of town that even included royal officials.<sup>15</sup> When Josiah reclaimed parts of the northern Kingdom, anyone holding the deed brought by their ancestors could inherit their ancestral lands in the reclaimed portions of the north.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the picture in 1 Nephi of wealthy northerners living in Jerusalem, holding official positions, and maintaining inherited lands outside the city, is remarkably consistent with archaeological discoveries made more than 140 years after the Book of Mormon was published.

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<sup>11</sup> Blake Thomas Ostler, "The Throne Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26/4 (Fall 1986): 67–95.

<sup>12</sup> Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany," 87.

<sup>13</sup> "Discourse By Apostle Erastus Snow," *Journal of Discourses* 23: 184.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of his Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 90–91.

<sup>15</sup> Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 121.

<sup>16</sup> Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 106–111.

**4. The Valley of Lemuel:** After arriving at the Red Sea, Lehi and his family travel 3-days before they arrive at a valley with a “continually running” river near the sea’s coastline, with impressive “firm, and steadfast, and immovable” walls and a variety of fruit and grain seeds (1 Nephi 2:5–10; 8:1). Upon discovering the valley and river, Lehi delivered admonitions to his sons precisely following the conventions of ancient Arabic desert poetry.<sup>17</sup>

The average rate of travel for small groups in the Arabian Desert is ca. 15–25 miles per day.<sup>18</sup> So, this valley should be within 45–75 miles south of the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba (the northeastern arm of the Red Sea). Yet, as late as 1984 a major survey of Saudi Arabian waterways concluded that there were no perennial rivers or streams throughout the whole country.<sup>19</sup> Turns out they missed one. In 1995, George Potter and a few other explorers found a stream running through Wadi Tayyib al-Isim, 74 miles (of on the ground travel) south of Aqaba, and documented its continuous flow at all times during the year. Only a small stream now, due to modern water pumps diverting the water to population centers, it runs through the valley where it was once a much larger water source. The shear granite cliffs prove more impressive than the walls of other near-by canyons, and various fruit and grain seeds appear to grow naturally there. Though the stream’s mouth does not quite reach the Red Sea at present, evidence suggests that the sea level has dropped considerably, so that around the middle of the first millennium BC, the mouth of this river would have emptied into the sea.<sup>20</sup> All told, Wadi Tayyib al-Isim appears to fit the description of Valley of Lemuel in the 1 Nephi. The “continually running” river in that canyon appears to be the *only* such river all along the eastern shore of the Red Sea, and it *just happens* to be within the 30-mile window within which the Valley of Lemuel and River of Laman *must* be if the Book of Mormon is true. If Joseph Smith made this up, *that* is a pretty lucky guess!

**5. The Legal Context of Slaying Laban:** You do not get very far into 1 Nephi before confronting a jarring ethical dilemma that has disturbed modern readers almost from the very beginning. Hugh Nibley pointed out, “If the Book of Mormon were a work of fiction, nothing would have been easier than to have Laban already dead when Nephi found him (killed perhaps in a drunken brawl) or simply to omit altogether an episode which obviously distressed the writer quite as much as it does the reader.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, the text of the narrative appears to reflect an intimate understanding of Israelite law, making a case for the legality of the act. The account appears to be deliberately written to defend the act as legally justified. John W. Welch explains, “precise

<sup>17</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Provo, Utah: FARMS/Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1988), 84–92.

<sup>18</sup> S. Kent Brown, “New Light From Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” in *Echoes and Evidences for the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Water Atlas of Saudi Arabia* (Riyhad: Saudi Publishing, 1984), xv.

<sup>20</sup> George D. Potter, “A New Candidate for the Valley of Lemuel,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 54–63; S. Kent Brown, “The Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/1 (2007): 64–73. On the sea level change, James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 208: “[archaeological evidence] indicates that the Red Sea has retreated from its ancient shoreline by five hundred meters.”

<sup>21</sup> Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 115.



words and technical concepts used by Nephi show that he wrote this story with biblical laws in mind that justifiably cast this episode in a favorable light.”<sup>22</sup>

While the primary text upon which this law was based is Exodus 21:12–14, this is not something that could have been accomplished by any yokel with a Bible, as the Laban text reflects proper nuances of interpretation that would not have been available to Joseph Smith. Welch explains that the crucial factors are: (1) *state of mind*—did the killer “lie in wait,” seeking to kill the victim? Did he “come presumptuously” with guile and murderous intent? And, (2) did “God deliver him into his hand”? (See Exodus 21:12–14.) Both of these justifications and other legal technicalities are captured in the text. Welch carefully analyzes 1 Nephi 4 and ancient interpretations of these requirements, finding that, “Nephi may have broken the American law of Joseph Smith’s day, but it appears that he committed an excusable homicide under the public law of his own day.”<sup>23</sup> Welch concludes,

the Laban episode is a case where the nineteenth-century environment offers little help. Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century audience was just as scandalized by Nephi’s killing of Laban as is a modern audience.... In its ancient legal context, however, the slaying of Laban makes sense, both legally and religiously, as an unpremeditated, undesired, divinely excusable, and justifiable killing—something very different from what people today normally think of as criminal homicide.<sup>24</sup>

All of this gives greater weight to the observation made by Nibley decades earlier: “Those who would strike the story of Laban’s death from the Book of Mormon as immoral or unbelievable are passing hasty judgment on one of the most convincing episodes in the whole book.”<sup>25</sup>

**6. The Brass Plates:** With the brass plates we are introduced to one of the most common scribal practices found throughout the Book of Mormon: writing on metal plates. These plates were kept for generations by descendants of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:16), and like Nephi’s own record, written in Egyptian (Mosiah 1:4). Among the contents of the record was some form of the Torah, as well as the writings of various prophets (1 Nephi 5:11–14).

The use of Egyptian writing in Israel from as early as the 10th century BC has already been noted. William J. Hamblin points to the discovery of bronze plates (in the early 1800s, there was no distinction between “brass” and “bronze”) written by Semitic people in an adapted form of Egyptian, called the Byblos Syllabic plates, as evidence that Laban’s set of plates is like others known from the ancient Near East.<sup>26</sup> Also interesting is that the earliest attestation of any

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<sup>22</sup> John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1 (1992): 120–121.

<sup>23</sup> Welch, “Legal Perspectives,” 121.

<sup>24</sup> Welch, “Legal Perspectives,” 140–141.

<sup>25</sup> Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 114.

<sup>26</sup> William J. Hamblin, “Metal Plates and the Book of Mormon,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 20–22; William J. Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean,” *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 37–38.

portion of the Torah is a passage from Numbers discovered on small, inscribed pieces of metal (specifically silver) that date to 600 BC.<sup>27</sup> In light of those who kept the record, it seems worth pointing out that archaeological evidence suggests that scribal traditions began earlier in the house of Joseph than in other Israelite tribes.<sup>28</sup> Bringing all this together, the brass plates seem to fit snugly within the historical context in which they are said to exist, as do the plates of Nephi, which fit the same profile (on metal plates, in Egyptian, by Josephites). Aaron P. Schade summarizes:

In summary, the scribal activity described in the Book of Mormon reflects an Egyptian scribal tradition in preexilic Judah that archaeological, paleographic, and anthropological evidence currently suggests. Writing in an Egyptian dialect, a tradition of writing within the lineage of Joseph, and the inscribing of metallic plates is consistent with the findings and interpretations of the evidence in current scholarship in relation to scribal activity in the kingdom at this time.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the details of record-keeping reported in 1 Nephi, as exemplified by the brass plates, fits the evidence found for that era with a great deal of precision. The language, the medium, and the tribe all accord with the evidence to create a multifaceted convergence between the text and archaeological findings.

**7. The Tree of Life Dream/Vision:** “The substance of Lehi’s dreams is highly significant,” Hugh Nibley once explained, “since men’s dreams necessarily represent, even when inspired, the things they see by day, albeit in strange and wonderful combinations.”<sup>30</sup> Lehi’s dream, and Nephi’s visionary interpretation, are replete with ancient Near Eastern imagery that matches in both physical realities and in symbolism. Nearly every element can be dissected and compared with ancient interpretations:

- *The dark and dreary wilderness/waste* (1 Nephi 8:4–8): Lehi starts in a dark and dreary waste or wilderness, needs an angelic guide, and after hours in darkness feels compelled to pray. Daniel L. Belnap points out, “a divine guide [is] a pattern experienced in visionary encounters” throughout ancient Israelite narratives.<sup>31</sup> C. Wilfred Griggs and John W. Welch have shown that it is common specifically to other tree of life narratives from the ancient Near East.<sup>32</sup> Nibley, meanwhile, points out that wandering, lost, in the dark

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<sup>27</sup> William J. Adams Jr., “Lehi’s Jerusalem and Writing on Silver Plates”; William J. Adams Jr., “More on the Silver Plates from Lehi’s Jerusalem,” both in *Pressing Forward*, 23–26 and 27–28.

<sup>28</sup> Aaron P. Schade, “The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 319–320.

<sup>29</sup> Schade, “The Kingdom of Judah,” 323.

<sup>30</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel L. Belnap, “‘Even as Our Father Lehi Saw’: Lehi’s Dream as Nephite Cultural Narrative,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley B. Johnson, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 218, brackets mine.

<sup>32</sup> C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS Reprint, 1996), 75–101, specifically p. 82; John W. Welch, “The

wastes of the desert is a common fear of all Arabian travelers, while George Potter and Richard Wellington note that northwest Arabia is barren and most groups travel at night to avoid the heat, thus a “dark and dreary waste” would have been a powerful, and very real image in the mind of someone like Lehi.<sup>33</sup> Belnap also shows that symbolically, this dark waste/wilderness fits the pre-Cosmic chaos motifs of the ancient Near East (including wordplay between the Hebrew for “wilderness/waste” and “chaos”), especially in its transition into a field said to be like a “world”—just as chaos was organized into the world “in the beginning.”<sup>34</sup>

- *The field with the tree* (1 Nephi 8:8–10, 20): The dark waste/wilderness eventually gives way to a large field, described as being like a “world,” with a tree, and Lehi’s fears subside. Nibley points out, “This in Arabic is the symbol of release from fear and oppression.... The Arab poet describes the world as a *maidan*, or large and spacious field.”<sup>35</sup>
- *The tree of life*: The tree itself is the central symbol in the dream. It is described as being white, and also having white fruit (1 Nephi 8:11; 11:8). Griggs shows that some traditions represented the tree of life as being a white cypress.<sup>36</sup> John A. Tvedtnes and Matt Roper note that the almond tree, a common “tree of life” in the ancient Israelite lore, is covered with white blossoms in the spring, giving the tree a “white” look.<sup>37</sup> Margaret Barker is impressed with the mention of white fruit, noting that “a text discovered in Egypt in 1945 described the tree as beautiful, fiery, and with fruit like white grapes.” She adds, “I do not know of any other source that describes the fruit as *white* grapes. Imagine my surprise when I read the account of Lehi’s vision of the tree whose *white fruit* made one happy.”<sup>38</sup> The symbolism of the tree of life is also fascinating. Daniel C. Peterson noticed that in Nephi’s vision, the interpretation of the tree is connected to the “mother of God” (1 Nephi 11:18) as the original English text read, a representation that matches divine

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Narrative of Zosimus (History of the Rechabites) and the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 326, 329.

<sup>33</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 43; George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New, Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort Publishing, 2003), 41–42: “The land of Midian in the northwest corner of Saudi Arabia is a wilderness second only in barrenness to the great Rub’ al Khali, or Empty Quarter, of the central Arabian Peninsula. Hardly a blade of grass breaks up the monotony.... Lehi would have been going into uncharted desert wasteland with only a finite supply of water. Most of the year the temperatures are extremely high and the lack of protection from the burning sun would have forced the family to make their journey at night. What better description of the terrain and conditions that the family traversed in the desert of Midian than a ‘dark and dreary waste.’”

<sup>34</sup> Belnap, “Even as Our Father Lehi Saw,” 217–218.

<sup>35</sup> Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 254.

<sup>36</sup> Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” 86–87.

<sup>37</sup> John A. Tvedtnes and Matt Roper, “Joseph Smith’s Use of the Apocrypha: Shadow or Reality?” *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 365.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, John W. Welch, ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2006), 76, emphasis in original.

mother (who is called *Asherah* in Hebrew) motifs from Israelite and ancient Near Eastern imagery.<sup>39</sup> Barker is also impressed with this association.<sup>40</sup>

- *The fountain of living waters = the tree of life* (1 Nephi 11:25): Nephi’s explanatory vision seems to equate the fountain of living waters with the tree of life. The waters of life and the tree of life are frequently associated in ancient Near Eastern creation myths.<sup>41</sup> One scholar explains, in “Mesopotamia the Cosmic Tree was brought into relation with the primal waters as the source of all life,”<sup>42</sup> while another states, “there is an intimate mythological and cultic connection between the tree and the waters of life.”<sup>43</sup> Griggs describes a tree of life tradition where the tree is linked with a “lake of memory,” where memory is a symbol for life.<sup>44</sup> The narrative Welch examines also links the tree with a source of liquid nourishment.<sup>45</sup> For Nibley, these associations simply make practical sense given the physical environment of the ancient Near East. “The tree and the water are often mentioned together, for the simple reason that in the desert the two necessarily occur together.”<sup>46</sup>
- *The river of water*: In addition to the living waters, there is a river of filthy water which represents the “depths of hell” and “a great and terrible gulf” (1 Nephi 12:16, 18; cf. 15:26–29). The tradition Griggs examines also has a second water source, which is associated with forgetfulness, and thus death.<sup>47</sup> He notes, “the avoidance of the spring on the left must be equivalent to the avoidance of a place of suffering, or hell.”<sup>48</sup> Welch explains that in one tree of life narrative, “the river or ocean functions as a demarcation between the righteous saints and the worldly sinners,”<sup>49</sup> just as it does in Nephi’s interpretive vision. In the Dead Sea Scrolls’ *Thanksgiving Hymns*, rushing torrents of filthy water flood over the wicked and “burst forth into hell itself.”<sup>50</sup> This is also an apt description of the gushing rivers of filthy water found in the Arabian Desert after a storm, as first pointed

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<sup>39</sup> Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243.

<sup>40</sup> Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” 76: “This revelation to Joseph Smith was the ancient Wisdom symbolism, intact, and almost certainly as it was known in 600 BCE.”

<sup>41</sup> Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008), 1:155–156; Andrew C. Skinner, “The Tree of Life in the Hebrew Bible and Later Jewish Thought,” in *The Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternity*, ed. John W. Welch, and Donald W. Perry, (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2011), 28–31.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Swift, “‘I Have Dreamed a Dream’: Lehi’s Archetypal Vision of the Tree of Life,” in *The Tree of Life*, 143, quoting E.O. James, *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 245.

<sup>43</sup> John M. Lundquist, “The Tree of Life in Asian Art, Religion, and Folklore: A Sampling of the Evidence,” in *The Tree of Life*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” 85–86, 88.

<sup>45</sup> Welch, “The Narrative of Zosimus,” 346–347.

<sup>46</sup> Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 159.

<sup>47</sup> Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” 85–86.

<sup>48</sup> Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” 85.

<sup>49</sup> Welch, “The Narrative of Zosimus,” 339.

<sup>50</sup> Described and cited in Tvedtnes and Roper, “Joseph Smith’s Use of the Apocrypha,” 367.

out by Nibley, and then confirmed by others.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, in Arabia these seasonal rivers typically run through deep canyons which are nearly impossible to cross, thus forming chasms not unlike the “awful gulf” described by Nephi.<sup>52</sup>

- *The iron rod* (1 Nephi 15:23–24): While modern readers typically imagine a railing leading to the tree, in the ancient world, railings were rare. In an ancient context, an iron rod would have been like a staff or scepter.<sup>53</sup> This might seem a little odd for us conceptually, but when the symbolism for rods, scepters, or staffs in the ancient Near East is examined, the Book of Mormon symbolism proves to be spot on. Tvedtnes points out the rod often symbolizes the “word of God” in ancient Israel, and Nibley adds that both ancient Jewish and Egyptian lore used the staff or rod as a symbol for God’s word.<sup>54</sup> Since the scepter or rod is often a symbol of authority, it is significant that Nephi’s vision associates it with the image of the savior being *worshipped* (1 Nephi 11:24–25). Barker, meanwhile, has added that the iron rod *guides* travelers, a common motif in biblical literature that is obscured by English translations.<sup>55</sup> Matt Bowen points out that in Egyptian, “rod” and “word” are derived from the exact same word, hence suggesting a wordplay connection utilizing the shades of meaning, something lost in translation.<sup>56</sup>
- *The mist of darkness*: Lehi sees a “mist of darkness” which distracts and obscures the tree and causes people to get lost, failing to find the path to the tree (1 Nephi 8:23; 1 Nephi 12:17). The only way to penetrate this mist is to hold fast to the rod, symbolizing God’s word. Nibley and others have pointed out that throughout Arabia, travelers often encounter a misty mixture of dust and fog, often making travel impossible.<sup>57</sup> Welch notes that in one tree of life narrative, there is a cloudy mist that prevents the unrighteous from reaching the paradise where the tree of life is found. Although different in that it was placed there by God, rather than the devil, the mists in both stories ultimately serve to keep the wicked from reaching the tree of life.<sup>58</sup>
- *The great and spacious building*: One of the most notorious symbols in Lehi’s vision is the large building where the proud point and mock the humble seekers and partakers of the tree (1 Nephi 8:26–27; 11:35–36; 12:18). Nibley and others have suggested that this reflects

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<sup>51</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 45; Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 46; Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 65.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 65; Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Zachary Nelson, “The Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” *Religious Educator* 10/3 (2009): 51: “Because it occurred in a dream setting, there is no need to suppose that the rod was held up or sustained by other supports. In other words, it is not necessary to see it as a railing, something seldom seen in ancient architecture.... Though railings were rare in Lehi’s world, rods or staffs were not.”

<sup>54</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, “The Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” in *Pressing Forward*, 32–39; Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 315–317.

<sup>55</sup> Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” 76–77: “Lehi’s vision has the iron rod *guiding* people to the great tree—the older and probably the original understanding of the word” (p. 77).

<sup>56</sup> Matthew L. Bowen, “What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?” *Insights* 25/2 (2005): 2–3.

<sup>57</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 43–44; Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 66; Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 47–48.

<sup>58</sup> Welch, “The Narrative of Zosimus,” 326, 332–335.

architecture from Arabia, where very early on “skyscrapers” several stories high were built in a way that makes them appear to be “standing in the air.”<sup>59</sup> Joseph Spencer suggests that this symbol is “a reflection of the corrupt temple of Lehi’s day, from which the wealthy Jerusalem elite would have mocked the wild-eyed prophets who dared to retreat into the wilderness to eat of the fruit of the tree of life.”<sup>60</sup> Thus it would convey social conditions of the time, a point which Pedro Olavarria expands on, noting that the Jerusalem establishment was eliminating *Asherah* (the divine mother symbolized by the tree of life) while she continued to be important in the countryside. This is reflected *exactly* in Lehi’s dream.<sup>61</sup>

That all these symbols not only seem to fit the real world context of the ancient Near East, but many also have appropriate symbolic meanings within that cultural milieu is highly significant. Meaning and symbolism is largely derivative from the culture within which a symbol occurs. As such, the way both symbols and interpretations in Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision converge with the ancient Near East is impressive. It is hard to imagine Joseph Smith pulling off such an accurate portrayal of ancient imagery. Hence, S. Kent Brown writes:

Lehi’s dream, perhaps more than any other segment of Nephi’s narrative, takes us into the ancient Near East. For as soon as we focus on certain aspects of Lehi’s dream, we find ourselves staring into the world of ancient Arabia. Lehi’s dream is not at home in Joseph Smith’s world but is at home in a world preserved both by archaeological remains and in the customs and manners of Arabia’s inhabitants.<sup>62</sup>

**8. Shazer:** After camping at the Valley of Lemuel for some time, Lehi and his party then travel south-southeast for 4-days before camping at a place they call “Shazer” (1 Nephi 16:13). Hugh Nibley noted, “The combination *shajer* is quite common in Palestinian place names; it is a collective meaning ‘trees,’ and many Arabs (especially in Egypt) pronounce it *shazher*.”<sup>63</sup> Nigel Groom defines the same term as, “A valley or area bounding with trees and shrubs.”<sup>64</sup> That Lehi camped there means some kind of water source existed, and water and trees go hand-in-hand in Arabia, as discussed above. The text also says they hunted there (1 Nephi 16:14), so wild game

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<sup>59</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 44; Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 68–69.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 99 n.2.

<sup>61</sup> Olavarria, “An Open Letter to Dale Baranowski: Regarding Your Uncritical Look at The Book of Mormon,” *The Blade of Averroes*, August 15, 2013, at <http://averroes2.blogspot.com/2013/08/an-open-letter-to-dale-baranowski.html> (accessed August 17, 2014): “In Lehi’s dream, the Asherah and the faithful are found a spacious field whereas the mockers are found in an urban setting: they wear fine clothes and reside in a great and spacious building. If the old religion persisted in the countryside then the older views would have been seen as backward by Jerusalem’s religious elites, becoming a source of shame for some (1 Nephi 8:25). Nephi knew Jerusalem and the surrounding environs, but he rejected the ways of that city (1 Nephi 2:13, 2 Nephi 25:2, 2 Nephi 25:6).”

<sup>62</sup> Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 64.

<sup>63</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 78.

<sup>64</sup> Nigel Groom, *A Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban; London: Longman, 1983), s.v. “shajir.”

must have been available. With 4-days of travel, at the same rate of about 15–25 miles a day, Shazer then must be about 60–100 miles from the Valley of Lemuel.

Generally south-southeast about 80 miles (of on the ground travel) from Wadi Tayyib al-Isim is Wadi al-Agharr, a lush valley oasis with lots of trees that stretches over 15 miles, in territory said to be the very best hunting grounds in the area. This is the only place that seems to fit Nephi's description of Shazer within the appropriate distance of the likely Valley of Lemuel.<sup>65</sup> Similar to the Valley of Lemuel, the text demands a certain kind of place exist within a narrow 40-mile window. Joseph Smith is just lucky enough that exactly one such place exists within limited, generally dry and barren territory.

**9. *Most Fertile Parts and More Fertile Parts:*** 1 Nephi 16:14, 16 speak first of “most fertile parts” and then “more fertile parts,” thus suggesting that as they traveled southward, the fertility would decrease. This region of Arabia (south of Wadi al-Agharr down to about the middle of the peninsula) was known as *Muhajirun*, meaning “the fertile pieces of land,” at least since Islamic times. George Potter and Richard Wellington have shown that the impressive fertility of this area is not evenly distributed: there is greater fertility in the more northern part.<sup>66</sup> Hence, the casual expressions of “most” fertile and then “more” fertile parts subtly converge with the realities of traveling southward through Arabia.

**10. *The Broken Bow Narrative:*** Immediately south of the *Muhajirun* the climate becomes more arid and dry. In 1 Nephi 16:20–32, it is after passing through the “more fertile parts” that Nephi's brothers' bows lost their springs and Nephi's steel bow breaks. Hamblin has pointed out that the change in climate could have caused both of these problems.<sup>67</sup> Although only the bow breaks, Nephi makes a new bow *and* arrow, an important detail since a wood bow would have required arrows of different weight and length than his steel bow.<sup>68</sup> Only specific kinds of wood can be used to make a workable bow—wood that is strong, yet flexible. Potter and Wellington found that the only wood in Arabia suitable for bow making is the Atim tree, which grows widely in a limited range around the mountainous area of Bishah, which is in the region south of the *Muhajirun*, thus fitting the narrative of 1 Nephi extremely well.<sup>69</sup> Based on this evidence, the story of Nephi's broken bow was written by someone who understood the realities of life in Arabia, *and* principles of archery, neither of which seem to be traits Joseph Smith possessed.

Beyond the realism of the story, it seems to serve typological functions that depend on an understanding of ancient Near Eastern motifs. Alan Goff points out, “The bow was symbolically

<sup>65</sup> Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 73–78.

<sup>66</sup> Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 80–98.

<sup>67</sup> William J. Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 373–375.

<sup>68</sup> Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow,” 392–393; David S. Fox, “Nephi's Bows and Arrows,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 41–43.

<sup>69</sup> Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, 99–105.

significant in ancient Near Eastern societies.”<sup>70</sup> Specifically, it functioned as a symbol of authority. “The bow isn’t just a tool or a weapon in biblical culture. The bow was a symbol of strength and leadership. The broken bow is, on the other hand, a symbol of submission.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, when the bow breaks, Lehi and his followers must be humbled. Goff explains, “The broken bow text clearly indicates the message that Lehi’s group must depend on the Lord.”<sup>72</sup> When Nephi makes a new bow, he becomes the only one in the camp with a working bow. Significantly, Nephi begins to take a stronger leadership role in this narrative, with Nephi only tactically acknowledging his father’s leadership. After this point, Nephi begins to directly receive revelation for the whole group (such as to build a ship, 1 Nephi 17:7–8). It is also shortly after this narrative that Nephi is first accused of being a usurper of their right to rule, which then becomes a common complaint (1 Nephi 16: 35–39). Thus, Goff points out, “If [Joseph] Smith wrote the Book of Mormon, he came up with precisely the right biblical symbolism to apply to Nephi as he begins to assert his leadership; at the same time Laman’s and Lemuel’s bows lose their elasticity.”<sup>73</sup>

**II. Nahom:** After the broken bow incident, the group travels for awhile, before they stop and bury the deceased Ishmael at a place called “Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:33–34). While every other place name in the text is explicitly given by Lehi and his family (1 Nephi 2:8–10; 16:6, 13; 17:5), Nahom is different. The use of passive voice appears to indicate it was already known by that name when Lehi arrived. A pre-existing name also means a pre-existing population. As a pre-existing place, then, it is potentially identifiable by its name. Turns out that in the southwestern region of Arabia (where Lehi’s family would be by now), there is a region known as Nehem, named after the tribe that controls the area, the Nihm tribe.<sup>74</sup> Because ancient Near Eastern languages, such as Hebrew, Egyptian, and South Arabian, do not have vowels when written, both the Book of Mormon “Nahom,” and the South Arabian Nehem/Nihm (also translated variously as Nahm, Naham, etc.) would be written simply as NHM.<sup>75</sup> Altars discovered in the late 1990s attest to “the Nihm region, west of Mārib,” around “7th–6th centuries BC,”<sup>76</sup> the very time 1 Nephi has Lehi passing through. All told, inscriptional evidence can document the existence of the Nihm tribe in the this same area as far back 800 BC, and perhaps even earlier.<sup>77</sup> After reviewing several attestations of the name in pre-modern maps and ancient inscriptions, Warren P. Aston summarized:

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<sup>70</sup> Alan Goff, “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and Book of Mormon,” (Master’s Thesis, Brigham Young University, June 1989), 92.

<sup>71</sup> Goff, “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts,” 95.

<sup>72</sup> Goff, “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts,” 95.

<sup>73</sup> Alan Goff, “Dan Vogel’s Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory,” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 388.

<sup>74</sup> Warren P. Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen: A Window into Arabia’s Past,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 4/1 (June 2014): 134–148.

<sup>75</sup> Warren P. Aston and Michaela Knoth Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi’s Journey across Arabia to Bountiful* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1994), 16, 80 n. 20.

<sup>76</sup> St. John Simpson, ed., *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen* (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 166.

<sup>77</sup> Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen,” 146.



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. It is noteworthy that without exception, each of these maps and texts portray Nihm in its present location, although many scholars assume that the tribal influence was wider in the pre-Islamic period.<sup>78</sup>

It is thus highly significant that this one particular name also appears in 1 Nephi, and in the same approximate area of Arabia.

Since Ishmael was buried at this place, it seems significant that there is a large burial complex in the area, the largest known in all of Arabia. It was in active use between 3000 BC–AD 1000. This is not a standard tribal burial ground, but appears to be a neutral ground where people from all around would come to bury their dead. Its location in Nehem/Nihm appears to be due to that tribe being expert stone workers who constructed the tombs.<sup>79</sup>

Etymologically, the South Arabian NHM has a meaning connected with stone masonry. It also appears to have roots with cognates in Arabic, Hebrew, and Egyptian which connect with suffering, morning, death, and hunger.<sup>80</sup> These meanings are quite appropriate for a land and people known for their nearby burial grounds and tomb construction. They are also all themes that show up in the narrative at Nahom in 1 Nephi 16:34–39, suggesting another wordplay that has been lost in translation.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, Nahom in the Book of Mormon is a place in southwestern Arabia where Lehi’s traveling party buried their deceased loved one, which appears to have pre-existed Lehi’s arrival. Likewise, Nehem/Nihm is a place in southwestern Arabia where people would go to bury their dead, attested in Lehi’s day and earlier. This convergence between Nahom and Nehem/Nihm is even more impressive in light of the additional convergences between the eastward turn and Bountiful, discussed below. Brant Gardner thus wrote:

Of course there is no inscription, “Lehi stopped here,” but none should be expected. Short of that absolutely conclusive evidence, the data pointing to the connection between the Book of Mormon Nahom and the now-confirmed location of a tribe (and likely a place) called NHM are extremely strong. The description fits, the linguistics fit, the geography fits, and the time frame fits. Outside Jerusalem, NHM is the most certain connection between the Book of Mormon and known geography and history.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Warren P. Aston, “A History of NaHoM,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51/2 (2012): 93.

<sup>79</sup> Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen,” 145–146.

<sup>80</sup> Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen,” 142–145.

<sup>81</sup> Alan Goff, “Mourning, Consolation, and Repentance at Nahom,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991), 92–99; Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 79; Stephen D. Ricks, “On Lehi’s Trail: Nahom, Ishmael’s Burial Place,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/1 (2011): 66–68.

<sup>82</sup> Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:289.

**12. Turning East:** From Nahom, Lehi and his family travels “nearly eastward” (1 Nephi 17:1), thus turning toward the interior of the desert before arriving at what we know as the Arabian Sea. It may have been logical for anyone who looked at a map of Arabia to have their fictional characters travel south-southeast, paralleling the Red Sea. But for Joseph Smith to have his fictional party turn into the interior desert would be a bold move. Yet, it is at the Nehem/Nihm region that trails branch out eastward. S. Kent Brown explains:

We first observe that, northwest of Marib, the ancient capital of the Sabeian kingdom of south Arabia, almost all roads turn east, veering from the general north-south direction of the incense trail. Moreover—and we emphasize this point—the eastward bend occurs in the general area inhabited by the Nihm tribe. Joseph Smith could not have known about this eastward turn in the main incense trail. No source, ancient or contemporary, mentions it. Only a person who had traveled either near or along the trail would know that it turned eastward in this area.<sup>83</sup>

Recent research using satellite mapping images confirms that it is *only* in the area of Nehem/Nihm that it would have been possible to turn east.

Only recently has satellite-assisted mapping enabled us to appreciate that after traveling southward into Arabia, as the Lehites did, people are prevented from easterly travel by shifting, waterless dunes of the vast Empty Quarter, as much today as in the past. However, a narrow band of flat plateaus beginning in the Nihm area, marking the southern end of the Empty Quarter, presents the first opportunity for travel in an easterly direction.<sup>84</sup>

Nephi’s itinerary, then, converges with possible and known ancient travel routes quite precisely. Brown concludes, “It is the only place along the incense trail where traffic ran east-west. Further, ancient laws mandated where caravans were to carry incense and other goods, keeping traffic to this east-west corridor. Neither Joseph Smith nor anyone else in his society knew these facts. But Nephi did.”<sup>85</sup>

During this portion of the journey, Nephi mentions that they ate “raw meat” (1 Nephi 17:2, 12). This seems disgusting, and perhaps even sounds like a major health risk. But a common practice in Arabia is to not actually cook their meat, but instead sun-dry it, which better preserves the meat in the hot climate. It is essentially what we would call jerky, but in Arabic is it called *bastern*, which literally means “raw meat.”<sup>86</sup> Jeffery R. Chadwick explains, “Jerky travels well, even in hot desert terrain.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, eating “raw meat” was not a greater health risk, but instead

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<sup>83</sup> Brown, “New Light From Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 89.

<sup>84</sup> Aston, “A History of NaHoM,” 84.

<sup>85</sup> Brown, “New Light From Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” 89.

<sup>86</sup> Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:293.

<sup>87</sup> Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “An Archeologist’s View,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 74.

keeps the meat “sweet” (meaning unspoiled)<sup>88</sup> for longer, and allowed the travelers to maximize their food supply.

**13. Bountiful:** After traveling eastward, they arrived at the sea, in a land with “much fruit and also wild honey” (1 Nephi 17:5), large trees from which a sea going vessel could be constructed (see 1 Nephi 18:1), ore for making tools (see 1 Nephi 17:9), and a prominent mountain nearby (see 1 Nephi 17:7). Along the southern coast of Arabia, in the southernmost corner of Oman, is the green and fertile Dhofar region, which lies basically eastward from the Nehem/Nihm area. David A. LeFevre explains, “The thin green band of trees, flowers, and grass along the Dhofar coast of Oman is not just the best choice for the group to locate while Nephi built his ship, it is the only choice.”<sup>89</sup> S. Kent Brown adds, “The ultimate destination, whether known to the family or not, was the Dhofar region in the south of modern Oman. It constitutes a botanical anomaly in Arabia, a virtual Garden of Eden during the rainy season. No other region, north or south, matches even remotely the Bountiful described by Nephi.”<sup>90</sup>

There is some disagreement between researchers over where, specifically within Dhofar, Lehi’s family camped while Nephi built his ship. Using about a dozen criteria derived from the text, a few different inlets within this region have been suggested.<sup>91</sup> Having multiple possible locations is not a bad problem to have! Regardless of the specific location of Lehi’s camp, there still only exists this one region that fits the place Lehi and his family called “Bountiful,” and it is essentially due east from Nehem/Nihm. And that more than a dozen different criteria can be satisfied by inlets within the area goes to show that it is not a just a *general* correlation, but yet another multivariate convergence between the text and a specific region of Arabia.

## Conclusion

None of the above examples are simple or superficial parallels; none of them are a single, isolated parallel. Each convergence involves multiple, often mutually dependant variables. In each case, those variables come together both in the text, and external data from archaeology, geography, linguistics, and ancient literature. It is not just that Nephi writes in Egyptian, and Egyptian writing is found in Israel. It is that Nephi describes his scribal writing in a way that matches how Egyptian was being used distinctly in Israel. It is not just that Lehi’s prophetic call has a throne-theophany, it is that it includes several narrative elements, all in proper sequence, and some not found in the biblical versions. It is not just that northern Israelites lived in Jerusalem, it

<sup>88</sup> Noah Webster, *American Diction of the English Language* (1828), s.v., “sweet,” online at <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/> (accessed March 24, 2014): “Not turned; not sour; as sweet milk,” or, “Not putrescent or putrid; as, the meat is sweet.”

<sup>89</sup> David A., “We Did Again Take Our Journey,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 65.

<sup>90</sup> S. Kent Brown, *Voices from the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2004), 46.

<sup>91</sup> Warren P. Aston, “Arabian Bountiful Discovered? Evidence for Nephi’s Bountiful,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 4–11; 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; 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.

is that they were prominent, wealthy, and had possession of ancestral lands, just as archaeology indicates. Lehi's dream does not just have one or two correspondences with ancient Near Eastern motifs, but every single element finds itself at home in that cultural milieu, and in some cases (as with the narratives examined by Welch and Griggs), many of the same motifs appear in clusters, sharing similar complex interrelationships and mutually dependant interpretations. All of the rest the convergences display similarly multifaceted details coming together in both text and external data, such as the multiple aspects of Israelite law in the slaying of Laban, or several ways the brass plates reflect the attested scribal practices. Each of these convergences seem to require an intimate knowledge of ancient Near Eastern, and specifically Israelite, culture and practices.

Perhaps most interesting are the geographic convergences. Each location on the itinerary involves several geographic features in the text coming together. Then they reinforce each other, as they are in interlocking relationships with one another. The Valley of Lemuel must be within 3-days of travel south of the northern tip of the Red Sea (the Gulf of Aqaba). But it also must be approximately 4-days north-northwest of Shazer. A valley like the one described in the Book of Mormon that does not have a place like Shazer 4-days south-southeast of it cannot be the valley described in the Book of Mormon. Thus, the fact that the *only* valley that satisfies all requirements for the Valley of Lemuel also happens to be about 3-days south of Aqaba, and 4-days north-northwest of the *only* place that fits the description of Shazer, becomes a sort of "dual convergence," if you will. Although less specific, due to the lack of travel times after that, the most/more fertile parts, and the place of the broken bow similarly must be in proper relationships with each other and other places mentioned in the text: The fertile parts being south-southeast of Shazer, with greater fertility in the more northern parts; then, south of that area must be a region where Nephi's and his brother's bows would break or lose elasticity and where bow making wood can be found, near mountains where Nephi can hunt. Once again, it thus becomes significant that just such an area is found south of the fertile parts, and *only* in that region can the bow wood be easily found in abundance. Nahom, then, must be further southeast still, eastward travel must be possible at that place, and Bountiful must be eastward from there along the coast. Because the change in directions allows for a rather tight interlocking relationship between Nahom and Bountiful, they too seem to form a type of "dual convergence." All told the whole itinerary runs as follows: the Red Sea–Valley of Lemuel–Shazer–Most Fertile Parts–More Fertile Parts–Broken Bow Area–Nahom–Turn Eastward–Bountiful. This itinerary proves to be consistent with the whole of Arabian geography and known ancient travel routes and capabilities, with details about the real world setting serving to explain why things happen in the text (as when Nephi's bow breaks, or what is meant by eating raw meat). As such, the itinerary in total combines to form a major convergence of intertwined details. It is hard to imagine anyone who had never actually been to Arabia so accurately describing the geography along the trail south-southeast, and then eastward.

Dever, as quoted above, says that a convergence creates a “historical datum,” which can only be overturned by a more likely, or I would say, more compelling explanation for the convergence, which must include superior evidence to that given. As such, these several convergences are more than enough to take 1 Nephi as historical. If you wish to dismiss it as such, you are under the obligation to provide a more compelling explanation for the convergences.

You may be eager to ask, what about the rest of the Book of Mormon? As I said, there are some complicating factors, to be discussed in more detail in part 2, which make this more difficult to assess. I also mentioned, however, that there are some interesting convergences there, too. None of that matters, however. Logically speaking, if 1 Nephi is historical, the rest of the Book of Mormon must be also. All scholars agree that after the 116 pages were lost, Joseph continued translating from Mosiah, through to the end of the Book of Mormon, and then went back to translate the small plates.<sup>92</sup> Yet, throughout Mormon’s abridgment are allusions to details in 1 Nephi.<sup>93</sup> How could Joseph Smith first make up a fiction about Lehi’s descendants, including references back to Lehi’s family’s experience in the wilderness, *and then* actually translate the historical record of Lehi and his family? Again, the logic just does not work. Hence, the words of Hugh Nibley, written more the 60 years ago, are truer today than when he first wrote them: “whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages.”

It seems to me that you did *exactly* that in your treatment of the Book of Mormon, at least when discussing archaeology (I didn’t notice any references to 1 Nephi elsewhere in your treatment, either). The above discussed convergences, and the many more unmentioned here, have serious implications for how the data you present *ought* to be interpreted. In fact, given the datum Dever says convergences create, it virtually *forces* an alternative interpretation than that which you have given. How examining this data from the ancient world *first*—as required by proper method—changes the paradigm for the data you presented in your letter, will be discussed in part 2.

Wishing you all the best in whatever the future may hold for you.

Sincerely,

Neal Rappleye

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<sup>92</sup> Brent Lee Metcalf, “The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalf (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1993), 395–444. Metcalf overstates—or perhaps *misstates*—the implications this has on the historicity of the Book of Mormon. See the Alan Goff paper cited below.

<sup>93</sup> Alan Goff, “Positivism and the Priority of Ideology in Mosiah-First Theories of Book of Mormon Production,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 11–36.