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## Lesson 3 - An Auspicious Beginning

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**Abstract:** The note of universalism is very strong in the Book of Mormon, while the conventional views of tribal and national loyalties are conspicuously lacking. This peculiar state of things is an authentic reflection of actual conditions in Lehi's world. Lehi like Abraham was the child of a cosmopolitan age. No other time or place could have been more peculiarly auspicious for the launching of a new civilization than the time and place in which he lived. It was a wonderful age of discovery, an age of adventurous undertakings in all fields of human endeavor, of great economic and colonial projects. At the same time the great and brilliant world civilization of Lehi's day was on the very verge of complete collapse, and men of God like Lehi could see the hollowness of the loudly proclaimed slogans of peace (Jer. 6:14, 8:11) and prosperity. (2 Ne. 28:21.) Lehi's expedition from Jerusalem in aim and method was entirely in keeping with the accepted practices of his day.

### Lesson 3

#### AN AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING

**Prospectus of Lesson 3:** The note of universalism is very strong in the Book of Mormon, while the conventional views of tribal and national loyalties are conspicuously lacking. This peculiar state of things is an authentic reflection of actual conditions in Lehi's world. Lehi like Abraham was the child of a cosmopolitan age. No other time or place could have been more peculiarly auspicious for the launching of a new civilization than the time and place in which he lived. It was a wonderful age of discovery, an age of adventurous undertakings in all fields of human endeavor, of great economic and colonial projects. At the same time the great and brilliant world civilization of Lehi's day was on the very verge of complete collapse, and men of God like Lehi could see the hollowness of the loudly proclaimed slogans of peace (Jer. 6:14, 8:11) and prosperity. (2 Ne. 28:21.) Lehi's expedition from Jerusalem in aim and method was entirely in keeping with the accepted practices of his day.

**Lehi's World was "one world":** The most conspicuous feature of the Near East of Lehi's day was the general and pervasive cultural unity brought about by an unusual if not unparalleled activity in international trade and travel. This will be the subject of the next three lessons, but since it will be our practice to begin each study with the Book of Mormon itself, it is in order now to point out how that text anticipates the discoveries of the last decades in this regard.

The most strongly emphasized as well as the most arresting aspect of history in the Book of Mormon is the all-pervading universality of its point of view. This is the more interesting since it is the complete antithesis of the view universally taken of ancient history up until the last few decades. Ancient societies were believed by one and all to have been tribal, exclusive, suspicious, mutually hostile on principle, super-nationalistic. This established misconception was inherited by modern scholarship not from modern science but from the ancient intellectuals who in their compilations of universal his-

tory were as obsessed by the evolutionary concept as the moderns have been.<sup>1</sup> The whole trend of contemporary study is away from this idea of ancient tribalism to the awareness of a oneness of world-civilizations that go back far beyond those Hellenistic times in which world civilization was so long thought to have had its origin.<sup>2</sup>

Rushing rapidly through the Book of Mormon one may point out some of the more striking statements of its universal point of view:

Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. . . . (1 Ne. 17:35.)

For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; . . . Wherefore, I write unto my people . . . that they may know the judgments of God, that they come upon all nations. . . . (2 Ne. 25:2-3.)

. . . (Christ) manifesteth himself unto all those who believe in him, by the power of the Holy Ghost; yea, unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, working mighty miracles, signs, and wonders, among the children of men according to their faith. (2 Ne. 26:13.) . . . All men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden. (2 Ne. 26:28.) . . . and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. (2 Ne. 26:33.)

Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men . . . and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth? . . . I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another . . . For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them. . . . (2 Ne. 29:7-11.)

For behold, I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in His Son. . . . (2 Ne. 30:2.)

For my soul delighteth in plainness; for after this manner doth the Lord God work among the children of men. . . . for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding. (2 Ne. 31:3.)

Do ye not suppose that such things are abominable unto him who created all flesh? And the one being is as precious in his sight as the other. And all flesh is of the dust; and for the

self same end hath he created them, that they should keep his commandments and glorify him forever. (Jac. 2:21.)

. . . for thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another. . . . (Mos. 23:7.)

Now my brethren, we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth. (Alma 26:37.)

For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true. (Alma 29:8.)

. . . I have other sheep which are not of this land, neither of the land of Jerusalem, neither in any parts of that land round about whither I have been to minister. (3 Ne. 16:1.) . . . But I have received a commandment of the Father that I shall go unto them, and that they shall hear my voice, and shall be numbered among my sheep. . . . (3 Ne. 16:3.)

. . . ye must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, yea, every soul who belongs to the whole human family of Adam. . . . (Mormon 3:20.)

. . . For the power of redemption cometh on all them that have no law. . . . (Moroni 8:22.) . . . if not so, God is a partial God, and also a changeable God, and a respecter of persons. . . . (Mormon 8:12.)

**The Ancient Near East—A Single Community:** But it is not so much by precept as by example that the Book of Mormon people display their remarkable freedom from racial and national prejudice. They simply do not think in terms of nationalism which is the very essence of history and history-writing in modern times. Even Moroni's "Title of Liberty" campaign is strictly a religious undertaking. The complete absence of the nation as a factor in Book of Mormon history can only be explained by a type of social organization in which the state did not figure conspicuously.<sup>3</sup> Such a condition of civilized society has been quite unthinkable to historians since the Middle Ages. It was first pointed out by the great Orientalist, Hugo Winckler when he was describing the peculiar state of things in Jerusalem in the days of Zedekiah, that is, of Lehi. By way of explain-

ing Jeremiah's intimate knowledge of affairs at the court of Babylon and throughout the Near East generally, Winckler wrote:

It has been customary to depict conditions in the Ancient East as those of isolated societies each living its own life. Precisely the opposite was the case. The Oriental was better acquainted with the situation of other peoples in his cultural area than the average man is today . . . Before all, the Oriental was totally unaware of national or language differences as forming an effective barrier between peoples. Just as Islam united an enormous geographical expanse of races and nations in a single unity that surmounted political and racial bounds, so in ancient times . . . commerce brought people into much closer contact with each other than our modern means of communication do.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the present century anyone wishing to find out about the world of Lehi would have begun by reading some standard work such as Rawlinson's *Ancient History*. There he would have discovered that Lehi, assuming he lived at all, must have moved in a world peopled by puppets and shadows, the exotic half-world of the Ancient East as our grandfather knew it. For Rawlinson's sources were Greek writers whose first tangible contacts with the past went back but a little beyond 600 B.C.; for them as for him, Cyrus, Psammetichus, and Nebuchadnezzar—contemporaries of Nephi—were the kings of old, and beyond lay only legend. To try to fit a real Lehi into such a make-believe world could only lead to trouble.

Things are quite different today. Lehi now finds himself not at the beginning of ancient times, but almost at the end of them. His century some have claimed to be the greatest of all centuries, producing from beginning to end more innovating geniuses and more epoch-making "firsts" than any other century, not excluding the nineteenth. The overall picture of that marvellously dynamic age cannot be overlooked in the study of the Book of Mormon, for Lehi was a child of his century and steeped in its culture. When they crossed the waters he and his people took with them a specific cultural baggage—that of the early sixth century and the Near East.

Never did they forget that they were "a lonesome and a solemn people," cut off from the main stream of world civilization, and never did they cease to cherish and remember their cultural origins. Not merely the opening pages but every page of the Book of Mormon bears the stamp of its ultimate origin.

**Lehi's World Background:** No other time or place could have been more auspiciously chosen for the launching of a new venture in civilization. At no other time in history and from no other spot on earth could the colonizers have set forth more richly equipped. If the Book of Mormon people lived for a thousand years on a single cultural endowment, that endowment itself represents the cumulated and concentrated heritage of all the great civilizations of the earth. As a matter of fact, our own twentieth century is scarcely less beholden to the men of Lehi's day than the Nephites and Lamanites were.

Recently Cyrus Gordon has made such a claim as this for the age and heritage of Abraham. Thus he concludes his significant study:

Palestine happened to be the point of maximum synthesis, where Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Mediterranean influences fused with the native Canaanite culture. A picture of what was happening is clearly reflected in the Narratives. Abraham was of Mesopotamian origin, and his son and grandson married girls from their kin in Mitanni. At the same time, Egyptian blood was in the Patriarchal household; Hagar was Egyptian as was also her son Ishmael's wife. Moreover, famine repeatedly drove the Patriarchs to Egypt from Abraham's time on. Canaan itself was a melting pot of Semite, Hurrian, Caphtorian, and other groups. The Patriarchal Hebrews enjoyed the ideal spot and the ideal time to fall heir to the rich and varied heritage of the entire ancient Near East, when Egypt and Babylonia were nearly spent. Furthermore, the pastoral and semi-nomadic purity of Patriarchal life saved the Hebrews from the decadence of that cosmopolitan age.<sup>5</sup>

All this applies with equal force to the age of Lehi as described in the Book of Mormon, not omitting Lehi's flight to the "semi-nomadic purity of Patriarchal life," which was so resented by his elder sons, the spoiled

children of "that cosmopolitan age." Every year new finds are revealing some new and heretofore unsuspected phase of the astoundingly cosmopolitan world in which Lehi lived.

**A Wonderful Age:** It was an unsettled age of big ideas and big projects, a time of individual enterprise and great private fortunes flourishing precariously under the protection of great rival world-powers, everlastingly intriguing and competing for markets and bases.<sup>6</sup> A strange, tense, exciting and very brief moment of history when everything was "big with the future." No other moment of history was so favorable for the transplanting of civilization, so heavily burdened with the heritage of the past or so rich in promise. For a brief moment the world was wide open. "The Saitic epoch was a period of great prosperity which was not limited to the ruling classes but was extended to the working populace as well."<sup>7</sup> Everyone was making money in the new economic paradises of the XXVI Dynasty and the revitalized Babylon. After a generation of war the Assyrian troublemakers had disappeared, like Nazi Germany, literally overnight, and the nations revelled in an unparalleled post-war boom backed by a phenomenal upsurge of population.<sup>8</sup> Wise men and prophets were worried,<sup>9</sup> but who would believe that within a few short years all the glory and dominion of the East as the Old World knew it would suddenly vanish forever? There was nothing on the political or economic horizon to indicate that the peace and prosperity achieved by the shrewd and experienced leaders of Egypt and Babylon could not be permanent, or that the undreamed-of riches that were being amassed on all sides actually represented the burst and glitter of a rocket that would in an instant vanish into utter darkness. The key to the future was not in population or business statistics, but where Lehi saw it, in the moral picture: ". . . for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations." (2 Ne. 25:2.)

**World Trade in Lehi's Day:** The population squeeze accelerated a world-wide activity in exploration and colonization that had been going on for some time but that reached its peak almost exactly in 600 B.C., in which year the two greatest Greek colonies, Massilia (Marseilles) in the west, and Olbia in the east, were founded. Everyone was taking part in new settlement projects or forming companies to finance them. The search for new resources and new horizons was everybody's business. A newly found papyrus from the 4th century B.C., Wilcken has shown, illustrates conditions in Lehi's day as well, and deserves to be quoted here because it has survived as an original document and in considerable detail. It is a legal text in which certain merchants living as far apart as Carthage in Africa, Massilia in France and Elea in Greece pool their resources to form a company for importing oil and aromatics from South Arabia and Central Africa to Alexandria! The raw product had to be sold to the King of Egypt for 46 drachmas per metrete, and he in turn immediately resold it to manufacturers for 52 drachmas, and continued to exercise nominal control over every stage of the manufacture of the cosmetics. Yet from first to last the actual operations were carried on by private individuals and companies, to whom the king allowed a fair profit, likewise guaranteeing protection from pirates and caravan raiders. Thanks to the peculiar willingness of the merchants to be content with the huge profits they were getting, this arrangement proved amazingly stable and workable: the system was going full blast in the time of Hatsheput, a thousand years before this particular document, and in the 3rd century A.D.—600 years later! In Lehi's day, the most secure and prosperous of all, it was at its height.<sup>10</sup>

**Colonization—The Search for Promised Lands:** Methods of colonization and exploitation of new lands were the same, whether followed by Greeks or Orientals. For a long time the Near East had been getting crowded,



the pinch being first felt in Syria and Phoenicia—due perhaps as much to deforestation and over-grazing as to population increase.<sup>11</sup> Of this area Ebers writes: “Their small country could not contain its numerous population; accordingly there sailed out of the Phoenician harbors many a richly laden vessel to search out favorable places of settlement for emigrants bound for the coasts of Africa, Crete, Cyprus and Sicily.”<sup>12</sup> Such colonies would continue to enrich the Mother city (hence our word “metropolis”) by furnishing her with markets and raw materials. The Greeks were playing the same game.<sup>13</sup> We read already in the *Odyssey* (VI 7 ff.) how Father Nausithous led his people on a new colonial venture after their failure to find rest in the Cyclops country:

They had first settled down in the wide valleys of Hypereia,  
Hard by the Cyclopes, those savage inhospitable men,  
Who constantly molested them, being stronger than they were.  
Leaving that place, they were led by the godlike Nausithous  
To Scheria, a place far removed from any civilized settlement,  
Where they built a walled city, erected houses and temples, and  
began to cultivate the land . . .

Every schoolboy should know of the wanderings of “Father Aeneas” who led his people through many toils by land and sea that he might reach his promised land. Thus he encourages his people:

Rally your spirits and get rid of this disgraceful fear.  
Some day you will be glad to remember these things:  
Through all these vicissitudes and dangers  
We are making our way to Latium, where Destiny hath  
Promised us rest and security; there it is decreed that the  
Rule of Troy (the mother city) shall be revived.  
Hang on, and look forward to better times! (Virgil, *Aen.* I, 202  
ff.)

These are no mere literary inventions. Almost every important literary figure of the 7th and 6th centuries participated in such projects, which are often dramatically described. Thus among the Greeks Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 631 ff.) writes of an earlier period:

Even as my father and yours, foolish brother Perses,  
 Used to sail around, trying to make a living,  
 And so landed here, after having journeyed much on the waters,  
 Having put forth in a black ship from Cyme in Aeolis,  
 Not running away from prosperity or wealth or success,  
 But from grinding poverty, such as Zeus gives to men.  
 So he came here and settled in the Mount Helicon country  
 In a miserable little community,  
 Askra—a vile place in wintertime, a hard place in summer, a nice  
 place never!

In the seventh century Tyrtaeus reminds the Spartans:

Zeus himself gave this place to the children of Herakles,  
 In the days when they left windy Erineus  
 And came to the broad island of Pelops.  
 (*Eunomia*, cit. Strabo, *Geog.* VIII, p. 362)

He is urging them as Aeneas did the Romans, to fight for their homeland as a *promised* land, granted by God to the wandering Herakles and all his descendants in the days of migration. About 600 B.C. Mimnermus wrote embittered lines on unsuccessful colonizing projects in which he participated. Thus a fragment cited in Strabo, *Geog.* XIV, p. 634:

We left our village on the cliff, Neleius in Pylos,  
 To come sailing full of hope to Asia Minor,  
 Where we settled in delightful Colophon by force,  
 Taking everything over as if we owned it.  
 But the river rose and flooded us out,  
 And so by the will of the gods we moved to Smyrna. . . .

The great poet Archilochus, who wrote in the seventh century, has left many vivid fragments recalling the hardships and disappointments of unsuccessful colonizing ventures in which he participated. Simonides of Amorgos himself led a colony from Samos, and is full of tedious practical wisdom. Alceus sought employment in Egypt in the days of Lehi, while his brother hired out as a mercenary in Babylon.

**An Age of Adventure:** From these and many other sources we can see what was going on. Small bands of

people, usually friends and relatives, would go forth under the direction of an able and daring leader, a *patriarch* (for that may well be the origin of the word "Father-leader"), from the "mother city" (for that is definitely the origin of the word *metropolis*), to try their luck in some chosen or eagerly-quested spot, a "promised land" where they could escape the hardships of their old life. These settlements always remained colonies, however. The purpose in sending them out was not only to relieve economic and population pressure at home but to provide "factories" of raw materials and markets for finished goods to the mother city. The control of the mother city depended not on military force but on cultural and sentimentalities which were carefully nurtured through the centuries, as we learn so movingly in Thucydides. By the sixth century hopeful parties of Greeks were everywhere being turned back by the discovery that other settlers—usually Phoenicians but often other races as well—had already occupied the best spots.<sup>14</sup> As the pickings became poorer, explorations became more daring and settlement projects more ambitious. Merchants and settlers in Lehi's day were already moving along the Atlantic seaboard and into the heart of Asia and even the Far East!<sup>15</sup> In the year Lehi left Jerusalem the Egyptian government sent an expedition consisting largely of Syrian and Phoenician personnel sailing clear around Africa from east to west.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after, the Phoenicians reacted to the challenge by sending Hanno on the same mission of circumnavigation in the opposite direction.<sup>17</sup> In the middle of the 6th century Scylas reconnoitered the coasts of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean from the Euphrates to the Indus, while in the west Carthage "reconnoitered the Atlantic Ocean to north and south with mighty fleets."<sup>18</sup> The Phoenicians ended a long phase of fierce mercantile competition in the Mediterranean by burning the great trading city of Tartessus—Isaiah's Tarshish of the proud ships—and closing the whole western Mediterranean and Atlantic areas to all trade but their own in 530 B.C.<sup>19</sup>

“The very spirit of the age,” writes Paul Herrmann, “seems to have been at work in the Punic voyage into the immense distances of the ocean, announcing the dawn of a new epoch. . . .”<sup>20</sup> The ancients always chafed at the limitations of their geographical knowledge (though we are beginning to realize how much greater that knowledge was than we have ever given them credit for), but never until modern times was that knowledge as great as it was in the 6th century.<sup>21</sup>

When Father Lehi led his little clan into the wilderness in search for a promised land he was not engaging in a fantastic enterprise at all. He was only doing what hundreds of idealistic and courageous men had done before him. If he had visions of a bountiful land in some far place (1 Ne. 5:5), so did they. If his followers never forgot their homeland and wept to remember it in the desert places, so did theirs, and if he had to rebuke and encourage them with strong words, so did they. The Book of Mormon opens on a note of complete authenticity. But to Lehi there is much beside, as the next lesson will show.

### Questions

1. How does the attitude of the Book of Mormon towards nation and tribe differ from that of the Bible? From that of conventional history?
2. What considerations now make it appear that the attitude depicted in the Book of Mormon is historically a correct one; i.e., the attitude actually prevalent in the Near East of 600 B.C.?
3. In what ways was Lehi’s time favorable to the project in which he was called to undertake?
4. What historical considerations enhance the plausibility of the whole story of Lehi’s migration?
5. How did Lehi’s education and business activities prepare him for his great task?
6. How did the age of Abraham resemble that of Lehi? Of Moses?

7. Compare the characters, mission, and activities of these men.

8. In what ways does Lehi's age resemble our own?

9. What warning is there for us in the story of Lehi? What comfort?

10. Does the fact that Lehi was a typical leader of his age detract from the claim that he was guided by the Lord?

11. Does the story of the Nephites appear at first glance to have had an auspicious beginning? Did the Restored Church of this dispensation have an auspicious beginning?