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Lesson 4 - Lehi as a Representative Man

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Abstract: There are many indications in the book of First Nephi that Lehi was a merchant. That title meant a great deal in Lehi's day; there is ample evidence that the greatest men of the ages engaged in the type of business activities in which Lehi himself was occupied. But along with that these same men were great colonizers, seekers after wisdom, political reformers, and often religious founders. Here we see that Lehi was a typical great man of one of the most remarkable centuries in human history, and we also learn how he was delivered from the bitterness and frustration that beset all the other great men of his time.

Lesson 4

LEHI AS A REPRESENTATIVE MAN

Prospectus of Lesson 4: There are many indications in the book of First Nephi that Lehi was a merchant. That title meant a great deal in Lehi's day; there is ample evidence that the greatest men of the ages engaged in the type of business activities in which Lehi himself was occupied. But along with that these same men were great colonizers, seekers after wisdom, political reformers, and often religious founders. Here we see that Lehi was a typical great man of one of the most remarkable centuries in human history, and we also learn how he was delivered from the bitterness and frustration that beset all the other great men of his time.

Portrait of Lehi: Lehi does not belong in the fantastic world that passed as the Ancient East a few years ago. He is at home in a very different kind of world, and a very real one. In the brief compass of Nephi's account, which is an abridgment of his father's own journal, whose type it imitates and continues (1 Ne. 1:2, 15-16), we are given an amazing amount of information, both general and particular, regarding conditions in Lehi's day. From this it can be shown that Lehi has an excellent claim to being a thoroughly representative man of his time and place. First consider what the Book of Mormon says.

Lehi was a man possessed of exceeding great wealth in the form of ". . . gold and silver, and all manner of riches. . . ." (1 Ne. 3:16, 2:4.) He had ". . . his own house at Jerusalem;" (1 Ne. 1:7), yet he was accustomed to "go forth" from the city from time to time (1 Ne. 1:5-7), and his paternal estate, the land of his inheritance, where the bulk of his fortune reposed, was some distance from the town. (1 Ne. 3:16, 3:22, 2:4.) He came of an old, distinguished, and cultured family. (1 Ne. 5:14-16.) The opening verse of the Book of Mormon explains the expression "goodly parents" not so much in a moral sense as in a social one: Nephi tells us he came of a good family and "therefore" received a

good traditional education: "I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father." (1 Ne. 1:1.) He was of the tribe of Manasseh which of all the tribes retained the old desert ways and was most active in the caravan trade.¹ He seems to have had particularly close ties with Sidon (for the name appears repeatedly in the Book of Mormon, both in its Hebrew and Egyptian forms),² which at that time was one of the two harbors through which the Israelites carried on an extremely active trade with Egypt and the West. He was proud of his knowledge of Egyptian and insisted on his sons learning it. (Mosiah 1:4.) He was a meticulous record keeper, conscientious to a fault, and given to addressing long moral tirades to youth. (1 Ne. 1:16-17 and elsewhere.) From his sons Nephi and Jacob one gathers that Lehi must have been something of an expert in vine, olive, and fig and honey culture.

He and his sons were connoisseurs of fine metal work (gold, silver, "precious things," weapons, armor, plates, engravings, "curious workmanship," "fine brass," etc.), though they had to acquire the skill of making them after they left Jerusalem (1 Ne. 17:9-10, 19:1, 2; Ne. 5:14-15); that is, their relationship to fine workmanship and precious materials had been that of handlers and owners but not of artisans and craftsmen.³ As we shall see, Lehi's behavior was a remarkable combination of courtesy and firmness, gentleness and toughness, caution and daring. Put all these things together, and you have a perfectly consistent and convincing picture of Lehi the merchant.

Merchants and Supermen: But being a merchant in Lehi's day entailed far more than sitting in a counting-house or bazaar. The ancient merchant blazed his own trails and made his own markets: ". . . he became patient, unflinching. . . . Only the bravest men, the most intrepid, the best swordsmen and fighters, became traders."⁴ On this subject we can do no better than to quote at some length an essay by Hugo Winckler:

The merchant went forth in person, and personally sought out the places and people that would receive his wares. . . . The caravan visits each place on the route and mingles with the inhabitants of each, while the modern transport employee knows only the overnight quarters at terminals and harbor towns . . . the traveling merchant of the caravans conveys his goods personally to the buyer, whose taste and temperament he must understand if he is to do business with him. . . . The person-to-person system of trade fostered a lively intellectual and cultural intercourse, as in our own Middle Ages, which was far more effective in spreading ideas than the modern method of the printed word. No temple, no center of culture, was ever out of contact with the great world-centers. . . . The student was obliged far more than he is today, to seek knowledge at the actual sources. . . . In Israel no one could be an educated man whose knowledge did not have ties with the temples of Babylon or Egypt, or whose degree of education was not judged in terms of how closely it matched both the theoretical and practical teachings of the great centers.

Intellectual intercourse was further promoted by the passion for traveling which is inborn in the Oriental. . . . He is not bound to the furrow, as the European is. The Islamic pilgrimage to Meccah is a necessary outlet for this vagrant urge, and the Orient has at all times known the wandering scholar . . . the man who was driven from land to land by wanderlust and the thirst for knowledge, and who covered distances that appear tremendous even to our modern means of communication, and did so with means and equipment so limited as to be beyond our comprehension. . . . Cultural conditions in the East threw men together and mixed them up in a brisk give and take of trade and craftsmanship . . . that took no account of language or racial differences and connection.⁵

Winckler, as we noted in the preceding lesson, wrote these words by way of explaining conditions in Israel in the time of Zedekiah. They say a good deal for the spirit and background of the Book of Mormon. The Oriental universalism here described is, as we have said, one of the most strongly marked characteristics of the Book of Mormon.

Lehi like his great contemporaries in the East and West, was a strange combination of man of action and dreamer. He was greatly worried about the future of Jerusalem, (1 Ne. 1:5) and his prayers and studies were rewarded by an apocalyptic vision. (1 Ne. 1:6-14.) His

attempts to make this public met with a violently negative reaction which put his life in danger. (1 Ne. 1:20.) After being severely rebuffed, Lehi was ordered in a dream to “. . . take his family and depart into the wilderness.” (1 Ne. 2:2.) From then on he shows himself as the great leader and colonizer—daring, resourceful, patient, and strong-minded.

Some Great Contemporaries; Solon: And so he takes his place among the titans of the early sixth century; a seeker after righteousness, a prophet, a poet, a scholar, a man of the world, a great leader, and a founder of nations. A thoroughly typical product, we might add, of 600 B.C. and of no other period in history. Let us explain this assertion. The Greeks always regarded Solon of Athens as the wisest and best representative of their race. He was a gifted poet, an able soldier, an incurable idealist, a great political theorist and practical politician (the real founder of Greek democracy). He was also a first-rate businessman, who never made much money but thoroughly enjoyed traveling all over the world. He built up a reputation for sagacity and honesty that has made his name proverbial to this day.⁶ His life span exactly matches that of Lehi.⁷ He spent a good deal of time traveling as a merchant in Egypt and the East, visiting the same important centers as those frequented by the importers and manufacturers of Jerusalem—including Lehi.⁸

“Solon must have carried many a cargo of oil or pottery from his own rocky Attica to the wealthy cities across the Aegean,” writes Professor Linforth, “and in spite of his love for his own native land he must have been charmed by the brilliant society which he found in Asia. . . . He may have been tempted into luxury and prodigality, as Plutarch supposed when he offered in excuse for such habits the trials and dangers of his mercantile career.”⁹ Certainly Lehi’s sons were so tempted, and it was to get them away from such “prodigality and luxury” that the Lord led his family into the wilder-

ness. Solon's words to the people of Athens bear astonishing resemblance to those being spoken at the very same time by the prophets at Jerusalem, for he was before all else a preacher of righteousness. No one would be surprised to discover such statements as the following in Jewish or Christian apocrypha, or even in the scriptures:

Behold the inhabitants of the city are minded to bring about the destruction thereof through their love of gain. They who lead them are of treacherous minds, but verily great sorrow and lamentation are about to fall upon them in their pride. Behold, they know not how to contain their lust. . . . They heed not the holy foundations of righteousness (the word *dike* here used may actually cognate with the Hebrew *tzedek*), which in silence lets things take their course until the latter-end, when surely comes the time of retribution. Behold a dire destruction cometh upon all the city and there is none who shall escape. The people have been quick to do iniquity and bring themselves into bondage. . . . As if it had fallen to a foreign enemy our cherished city is wasted away and consumed by those secret combinations which are the delight of evil men. . . . Thus evil worketh its way among the people, and many of the poor and needy are loaded with shameful chains and sold into bondage in foreign lands. . . . No man findeth security within his own gates, for evil leapeth over the high wall and finds him out even though he hideth himself in the secret recesses of his inmost chamber. . . .

These lines, quoted by Demosthenes in his oration on the False Embassy, were written by Solon about the year 600 B.C. How like some of the prophets they sound! So might Lehi have spoken to Jerusalem. And just as Lehi when ". . . he went forth among the people and began to prophesy, . . ." was greeted with mockery that was a prelude of worse things to follow, (1 Ne. 1:18-20), so when Solon went forth to preach to the Athenians in the market place at that time, he had to feign insanity so that the people might mock him rather than put him to death.¹⁰ It should never be forgotten that it was this man, standing absolutely alone "like a wolf holding his own against a great pack of dogs closing in from every side," who gave Athens her constitution and later single-handedly preserved it from destruction, and

thus did perhaps more than any other one man for the cause of popular government in the world.¹¹ We are still in his debt.

Thales: Another who visited the East on business in Lehi's day was Thales of Miletus, recognized to this day as the Father of Western philosophy and science. His mother was a Phoenician and he received most of his education in Egypt, which gives him much the same cultural background as Lehi himself.¹² Aristotle says that Thales, being laughed at as an impractical dreamer, taught his critics a lesson when he turned his remarkable intelligence to business and in a short time succeeded in cornering an important market in olive-oil; thereby qualifying as the first man to achieve a monopoly by playing the stock market.¹³ After that he returned to a life of thought, but it was by no means thought devoid of action. Like Solon, he remained all his days a traveler and a man of the world, going from city to city and land to land imparting freely of his great scientific and political knowledge, which were in world-wide demand, to all who asked for it. Among other things he drafted a constitution for a United States of Greece.¹⁴

The Seven Wise Men: Like Solon, Thales would seem to be ages ahead of his time. But was he? Not at all: these men were no freaks or misfits in their day, but thoroughly representative. They were contemporary with, and usually numbered among, the Seven Wise Men, for example—a fictitious society of the wisest men then living, who left behind enduring reputations as the wisest of all time. The imagination of succeeding ages endowed the Seven Sages with supernatural wisdom and powers, and told how they used to meet from time to time to sup together and exchange among themselves the choicest wisdom of the East and West.¹⁵ All the seven, who captivated the imagination of succeeding ages, were thought to combine great powers of imagination with sound, disinterested political sense and unshakeable moral integrity, and though indifferent to

wealth all had possessed at some time great private fortunes.¹⁶ Their historical importance rested on the role they played as political teachers and advisers in a time of political world crisis.

The century that saw the fall of Jerusalem also saw the collapse of the old sacral kingship throughout the ancient world, and into the vacuum it left behind rushed all sorts of political parties and theories; almost every city in the world was torn between oligarchical, dictatorial, and democratic factions in a desperate struggle to establish a new principle of authority in government.¹⁷ Even in the East where monarchy continued its sway, it was on a new liberal footing established by Cyrus the Great, the ideal philosopher king whom Jews and Greeks vied in honoring as a saint and model ruler forever after.¹⁸ It is against this background of political ferment that the Seven Wise Men played their principal role, which was that of wise and disinterested counselors to a perplexed and leaderless humanity.¹⁹

The Great Religious Founders: It is not without significance that Lehi counted among his contemporaries not only the greatest first names in science, politics, and business, but also the most illustrious religious founders known to history: Gautama Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tze, Vardhaman Mañavira (the founder of Jainism), Zarathustra, and Pythagoras were all of Lehi's day.²⁰ All these men were seeking for light, and whatever degree of success they may have enjoyed, their lives are an eloquent commentary on the unparalleled display of physical, mental, and spiritual energy that renders the century of Lehi unique among all others. If it seems asking a lot for the culture of a great nation to derive its whole substance for a thousand years from a single moment in history, let us remember that our own civilization of the twentieth century is hardly less deeply indebted to the century of Lehi. The political, economic and religious traditions of the world still bear clearly and un-

mistakably the stamp of the great Greek and Oriental innovators of that wonderful age.

But Lehi Was Different: But in one thing Lehi stands quite apart from all the others save his fellow prophets in Israel. He actually *found* what the rest were only looking for. Solon summarized his life's experience in a single famous line: "No mortal ever knows real joy: all upon whom the sun shines are but miserable wretches."²¹ The same sad conclusion epitomized the wisdom of all the Seven Wise Men, East and West. One hears the wise humanity of Solon the merchant behind this sad but sympathetic conclusion:

Like gaping fools we amuse ourselves with empty dreams. . . . Do not doubt it, insecurity follows all the works of men, and no one knows when he begins an enterprise, how it will turn out. One man, trying his best to do the right thing, steps right into ruin and disaster, because he cannot see what is ahead; while another behaves like a rascal and not only escapes the penalty of his own folly but finds himself blessed with all kinds of success.

In the end, he says, no one can look forward to anything but "death or dire disease or the creeping evil of old age."²² Disillusionment and a wise resignation are the sum and substance of the teaching of the wisest men who ever lived (read Socrates' *Apology* if you doubt it)—they did not have the answer, and the essence of their great wisdom was that they were honest enough to recognize it and admit the fact.

Now Lehi too was of this sober persuasion; he found neither happiness nor security in his wealth and success. And then something happened that changed everything: he had a revelation, and as a result ". . . his soul did rejoice, and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him." (1 Ne. 1:15.) Lest we hastily conclude that Lehi was but a typical wise man of his age, and no more, we have but to set up his story and his sermons beside the stories and sermons of his great contemporaries of the East and West. What a con-

trast! For all their moral fervor, nothing could be less like the inspired utterances of the man from Jerusalem than the teachings of the great Greeks, with their worldly wisdom and their bleak pessimism.

Questions

1. Are the "representative men" of their time typical or average men?
2. In what way are Joseph Smith and Brigham Young representative men?
3. What were Lehi's qualifications for his task? Which was more important, his training or his character? Explain.
4. What is significant in the resemblance between Lehi, Solon, and Thales a) as evidence of the authenticity of Nephi's account? b) as guaranteeing the quality of Nephite civilization?
5. What manner of man was Lehi? What were his weak points?
6. How did Lehi react to the world-crisis and moral degeneracy of his time?
7. What can the individual do in such a situation?
8. Is it an accident that the greatest religious founders known to antiquity were all contemporary with each other? With Lehi?
9. How does Lehi differ from the other representative men of his age?
10. Compare Lehi's message to the world with the message which Solon has to give us.