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Chapter LVII

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Abstract: Domestic Life Among the Nephites—Household Duties—Dress—Ornaments—Homes—Food—Manufactures—Transportation

CHAPTER LVII.

DOMESTIC LIFE AMONG THE NEPHITES—HOUSEHOLD DUTIES
—DRESS—ORNAMENTS—HOMES—FOOD—MANUFACTURES
—TRANSPORTATION.

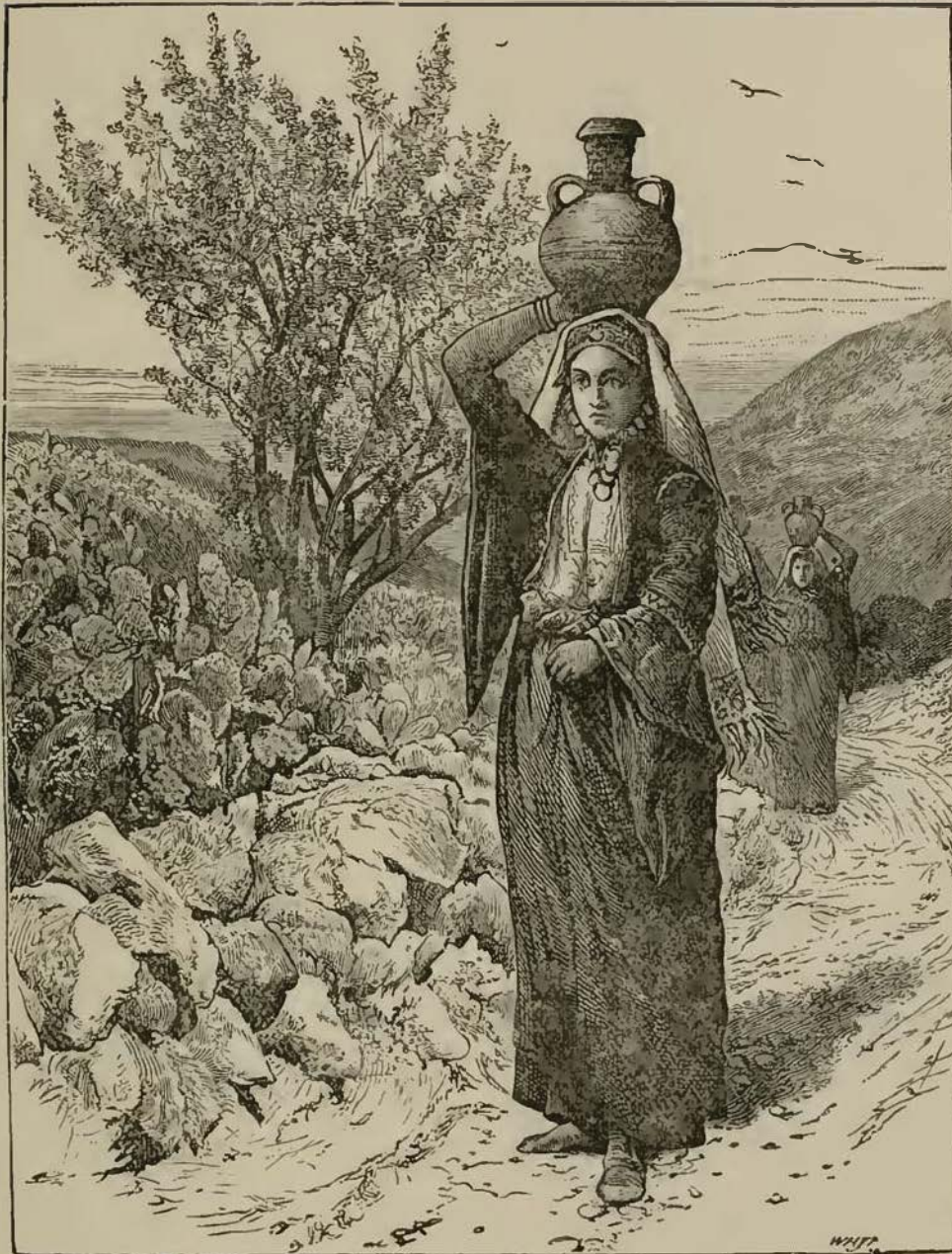
FROM the casual reference found in the historic portions of the Book of Mormon, we are led to infer that the domestic life of the Nephites was patterned, as it very naturally would be, after the manners and customs of their forefathers in the land of Jerusalem, modified, of course, by time and their surroundings. The changed material conditions, the absence of older though co-existent peoples and powers, the new and sometimes strange animal and vegetable productions, etc., all had an influence in the formation and growth of their civilization; trivial, perhaps, when considered separately, but when taken together, and working for centuries, having a marked effect on their public polity and home life. It is, however, necessary to explain that the details of the latter are very meagre, and only obtained incidentally, as they may form a link in the chain of some historical narrative, or be introduced as an illustration in some doctrinal teaching or prophetic warning.

In the midst of a people guided or reprov'd through their entire national life by an almost continuous succession of inspired teachers, it is but reasonable to conclude that the domestic virtues were assiduously cultivated, and all departures therefrom severely rebuked. Industry, economy, thrift, prudence, and moderation in dress were evidently as much the subject of the prophet's commendation then as in these latter days. Zeniff and others directly refer to the labors

and toils of the Nephite women in spinning and making the material with which they clothed themselves and their households; and the same fabrics which delight the modern daughters of Israel also appear to have pleased the eyes of their Nephite sisters in the long ago. We must, however, say to the praise of these ancient worthies, the mothers of Mosiah, Alma, Moroni, Helaman, and of the two thousand striplings who loved to call the latter father, that the beauty of their apparel was the workmanship of their own hands. Steam looms, spinning jennys, and their like, were unknown, so far as we can learn, to the enterprising, vigorous, God-blessed race that for nearly a thousand years filled the American continent with the favored seed of Jacob's much-loved son.

The materials of which the clothing of this race were made are frequently mentioned in the inspired record. Fine silk, fine twined or twisted linen, and cloth of every kind are often spoken of. In one place good homely cloth is mentioned. By the word homely we must not understand the writer to mean ugly; the word is there evidently applied in its original significance, as it is used to-day in England, for homelike or fit for home—such material as was suited to the everyday life of an industrious, hard-working people.

The love of ornaments has ever been a characteristic of Abraham's chosen race. The golden earrings and bracelets that gladdened the eyes of Rebecca, when sought as the wife of the patriarch's son, have had their counterpart in many a more modern instance. It was so with Sariah's myriad daughters. Time and again we read of pride and vanity entering the hearts of the people, and of their affections being set upon



THE MOTHERS OF THE NEPHITES.

their costly apparel and their ornaments of gold, of silver, of pearls, of precious things (gems?), their bracelets, ringlets, etc.

Nor would it be just to convey the idea that the gentler sex were alone guilty of these extravagances; the sacred record admits of no such conclusions. We cannot judge by the sober drabs, greys and browns with which the civilized gentleman of to-day clothes himself, of the colors, the styles or the fashions of the raiment of the Nephite beaux. The only safe conclusion that can be drawn is that they probably copied to some extent the gorgeousness of tropical nature by which they were surrounded. Nor is it reasonable to suppose that a single description would apply to the styles in the days of Leli, of Benjamin and of Mormon, any more than the varied fashions of the days of the Williams, the Edwards, the Jameses and the Georges of English history could all be condensed into one sentence. It is not conceivable that dress, or anything else, remained entirely unchanged throughout a thousand years, though it is quite possible that those changes were nothing like so sudden or so radical as have been those that have taken place among the leading nations of western Europe. On these points, however, so far as the record of Mormon is concerned, we can simply surmise, as the military accoutrements, armor, etc., of the warrior are the only habiliments with regard to which he gives any particular details. It is this poverty of information on this and kindred subjects that makes it so difficult for our artists to illustrate, with any assurance of approximate correctness, scenes and incidents from Book of Mormon history.

Nor can we learn much more with regard to their

residences than we can concerning their dress. The most detailed account given of any man's home is that of Nephi, the son of Helaman. His house was situated on the main highway which led to the chief market place of the city of Zarahemla. In front of his house was a garden, and near the gate opening upon the highway was a tower, upon the top of which the prophet was accustomed to pray. These towers, from the numerous references made to them, either as private property or attached to their places of worship, as watch towers or as part of their system of fortification, must have formed quite a conspicuous feature in the Nephite landscape.

The residences of the rich were elegant and spacious, adorned with exceedingly fine wood work, carving, etc., and with ornaments of gold, silver, copper, brass, steel and other metals. From the importance attached to the fact that but little timber existed in the northern continent when the Nephites began to spread over it, and consequently that the immigrants had to build their houses of cement, it is presumable that wood entered largely into the composition of the buildings in the southern lands. This idea is strengthened by the frequent reference made to the skill of their artisans in wood working, and in the excellence they had attained in the refining of ores and the manufacture of metal ornaments for their houses and persons. Regarding one monarch it is written: King Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine works of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff and of copper; and he also built him a spacious palace, and a throne in

the midst thereof, all of which was of fine wood, and was ornamented with gold and silver, and with precious things. And he also caused that his workmen should work all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple, of fine wood, and of copper, and of brass, etc. This was in the land of Lehi-Nephi.

We next turn to the food of this people. Here, also, we are without definite information, but we can measurably judge of their staple articles of diet by noticing the grains they cultivated most extensively: to wit, wheat, corn and barley, the latter appearing to have been the standard by which they gauged the price of other commodities. Great attention was also given to the planting of fruit trees and grape vines. From the fruit of the grape abundance of wine was manufactured, of which (we think we do the Nephites no injustice by saying it) they were as fond as are the generality of mankind. They were not as attached to a meat diet as were the Lamanites, who were great flesh-eaters, but they apparently kept large flocks and herds as a source of food supply, as well as for wool, leather, etc., and to provide for the numerous sacrifices enjoined by the law of Moses, which they carefully observed, until the offering of that greatest of all sacrifices on Mount Calvary, of which all the rest were but types and shadows.

Thus we may conclude that bread made from corn, wheat or barley; the flesh of their flocks and herds, together with that of wild animals caught in the chase; fruit, wine, milk and honey, formed the basis of their daily food, differing, no doubt, in details, according to the location, climate and other circumstances.

Their methods of locomotion and modes of trans-

portation are not described. They were very rich in horses, and doubtless made use of them as beasts of burden. The fact that large bodies of this people made extended journeys in their various migrations and colonizings, is beyond dispute. From one family they filled a continent, or more properly two continents. The use of ships is not mentioned until the middle of the last century before the Christian era. These were then used in conveying immigrants, lumber, provisions, etc., to the northern continent; the first ship-building, of which we have an account, having been done at the settlements near the Isthmus of Panama, to which point good roads had by that time been constructed. In the earlier history of the Nephites it is probable that most of their material was transported on pack animals, as is done to-day in the regions then inhabited by them. In the dense tropical vegetation of the wilderness, and along the mountain slopes of the Andes, road-making was difficult and expensive, and packing on the backs of animals (say the horse, the mule, the llama, the alpaca, etc.,) was the cheapest and most convenient to a comparatively poor and small people.

Chariots are mentioned but seldom. The Lamanite monarch, Lamoni, had his horses and chariots, to which reference is more than once made; and in after years, when the Nephites gathered with all they possessed into one place, to defend themselves against the Gadianton robbers (seventeen years after the birth of Christ), they removed their provisions, grain, etc., by means of vehicles called chariots. These are the only instances, of which the writer remembers, where vehicles of any kind are spoken of in the Book of Mormon, in connection with the inhabitants of this continent.