



Type: Magazine Article

Book of Mormon Women and Their Work

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Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (March 1928), pp. 121–126

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: Women in the Book of Mormon were probably similar to women of all eras, the inspiration behind good men. Book of Mormon women that are referred to by name include Sariah, the wife of Lehi, and Abish, a Lamanite servant to King Lamoni. Women were held in high esteem, possessed great talents, and their work was important.

THE
Relief Society Magazine

VOL. XV

MARCH, 1928

No. 3

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By John Henry Evans

The Story of Obscure Man.

There was to be an organ recital in the Tabernacle at Salt Lake City. You know without being told what a wonderful thing that is even today, when there are other great organs in the United States. It was more so in the days I am speaking of, because at that time it was the only instrument of its kind in the country, if not in the world. On this occasion some notable persons from different parts of our nation were present to hear the organ for the first time.

The organist, who very naturally wanted to show himself at his best, proudly struck the keys for the opening notes. But no opening notes issued. He struck them again, with the same result. It was in the days before electricity had been harnessed to do the hundred-and-one things it now does for man. In considerable alarm he went behind the instrument to see if the man who operated the bellows that furnished the power had any explanation of the organ's embarrassing silence.

"I was not turning the crank," he said simply.

"Not turning the crank!" the organist fairly shouted. "And for what reason, pray?"

"You see, sir, it's this way: You, bein' at the keyboard, gets all the praise and credit for the beautiful music, while I, bein' back here where nobody ever comes, gets none at all. And yet, sir, as you'll admit you can't do anything without me. I just wanted to teach you, sir—that's all."

The Story of Obscure Woman.

That is the way it has been with woman. Always, until recently, she has been at the back of the organ, while man has been at the keyboard, and often it has not mattered that she has, more times than we can count, furnished the inspiration and the power by which man has worked. It is as if you were to hold up a

rose to be admired and forget all about the wondrous forces inside it that had produced its surpassing beauty. Not in one nation alone has woman been in the background and man in the foreground, but in all nations, especially in the Hebrew nation, where lay the roots of the Nephite peoples.

Jewish Ideals of Woman in Ancient Times.

That hint about the Hebrews will bear looking into a little. It may give us a clew on which to work when we come to look for the ideals of womanhood that the ancient peoples of this continent started out with and developed here. And so I ask the question, What about woman among the descendants of Abraham?

From the time of this patriarch to the close of the New Testament days, is about two thousand years. Yet in those twenty centuries there is surprisingly little in the Bible about woman and her work. Mostly we read of what man thought and did. That is partly because woman's position among the Jews was subordinate to man's and partly because man wrote all the histories. If the person at the keyboard I mentioned were to write a book about organs, we should perhaps have little or nothing about the worker at the bellows.

The Hebrews had no woman ruler—at least, no woman that appeared openly as a ruler. None was ever on the throne, that is, although, for anything we know at present, she may have directed public affairs on more than one occasion from behind the scenes. Public affairs were for men. The home was for woman, but even there man was in theory the “head.” Woman was at best “an help meet for him.” Paul forbade a woman to speak in the church. A man might have more than one wife. Also, not to have children was a “reproach.” For “children are an heritage of the Lord, and his reward.” It was dishonorable, too, for a woman to be idle. The work she was expected to do lay in the home. She was supposed to grind corn between two millstones, to herd sheep, to prepare the food, to dispense hospitality, to make clothing for the whole family. She was expected, moreover, to cultivate the kindlier virtues in herself and in the children, if she had any. Sometimes, as in the case of Hannah, she dedicated her son to the Lord. A widow could always claim protection, and if she had a brother-in-law on her husband's side, she was supposed to marry him.

These are the things that stand out in the culture of the Israelites, so far as concerns the station and the work of woman, and these are the things, too, that must have lain at the foundation of Nephite life in this respect, as we shall see when we come to consider the few women whose names are mentioned in the Book of Mormon. That is not to say, though, that the Jews did not regard the work of their women as important, for

they did so look upon it. Nor is it saying that they did not love and cherish their women as highly as the men of other stations. The fact is, there have been no people of any time or country that thought better of womanhood than the children of Abraham. And in this respect, too, the Nephites, their kinsmen, must have resembled them.

Sariah, Lehi's Wife.

The first of the Book of Mormon women to be mentioned here is Sariah, Lehi's wife. She is given three little sentences in the Record. On the occasion when the four boys returned from Jerusalem with the brass plates, our Old Testament, essentially, her son Nephi writes: "My mother, Sariah, was exceeding glad, for she truly had mourned because of us. For she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness. And she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man and that he had led us forth from the land of our inheritance to perish in the wilderness, because her sons were no more. After this manner had my mother complained against my father. But when we returned, my mother was comforted."

This has been taken to mean that Sariah was but poor spiritual consolation to her husband, however good a housewife she may have proved, for, after all, "man shall not live by bread alone." And that may easily be. But it may have been only a temporary mood, brought on by a terrible anxiety. There is a bare possibility, too, that this may have been an isolated case, just as in most homes today a batch of bad bread draws a fatherly comment because it is exceptional, whereas a hundred batches of good bread evoke no mention, because they are taken for granted. Not, of course, that I am defending Sariah in the situation. To complain is never really justifiable, however human it may be. I am only suggesting that her complaint should not be allowed to blind our eyes to her virtues. What stands out in the passage quoted is her motherly solicitude. She may not have the faith and trust in God that her husband has, but, if so, she probably has not so much knowledge, either. The simple words, "My mother was comforted," leaves room for the imagination.

Abish, the Lamanite.

Another woman mentioned in the Nephite record was named Abish. She was a Lamanite, and therefore what is said of her is the more remarkable since these people did not, on the whole, take any interest in religion. You will easily recall the circumstances in the case. Ammon, a Nephite missionary, has come among the Lamanites, under a special urge to convert them. He has preached the gospel to the king, who now lies prostrate on the ground, overcome by the Spirit. The queen also, pres-

ently, with Ammon and some herdsmen of the king's lies there from the same cause.

And now Abish comes upon the scene. Gladness is in her eye and on her face and in her heart. And so, in order that as many others as possible may experience the same sensation as herself, she rushes out and goes from house to house, telling everyone to "come and see." But when they have come, their hearts respond differently from hers. They are angry. They seek for the cause, and, as usual with bad humor, light on the wrong thing. It is the Nephite stranger, they think, that is responsible for all the trouble. But the maid knows it is due to the power of the Lord working in the prostrate forms. When she fears that one of them will hack Ammon to pieces, she goes to the queen, takes her by the hand, and revives her.

A woman is supposed not to be able to keep a secret. But Abish has one, and knows how to keep it, too. Here it is: Years before, perhaps when she was a little girl, her father—was he a Lamanite?—had a vision. What had become of him or how he come to have one, is left to the imagination, like so many other things in the Book of Mormon. But the vision was good seed put into fruitful soil with Abish. For his daughter, not daring to mention it to her ignorant and hardened associates, had secretly nursed and cherished it in her heart, waiting, no doubt, for the time when she might speak out. And now that time had come.

It is only a glimpse that we get of Abish—but a glimpse of a face that reveals much, if we use our imagination.

The Lamanite Queen.

And this Lamanitish queen, too, is interesting. We do not know what her name is. She is called merely "the queen." Her husband is king only of a province, not of all the Lamanites, and a bloody-minded fellow he is, too, till he is converted. For, as you know, he does not think twice over a trifling matter like running his poor herdsmen through with the sword because they have let thieves steal his majesty's cows or sheep. Of course, we must not allow ourselves to think of crowns and thrones, of fine silks and perfumed baths, of palaces and liveried servants, when we say "queen" in this case. For the Lamanites of those days were—well, Lamanites. But the queen was still a queen, and, as the old saying has it, all women are the same "under the skin."

When the king, her husband, had fallen, he was carried to her presence and laid on the bed. Believing him to be dead, although she declared he did not smell, she and her sons and daughters mourned over him after the fashion of her people. Two days he lay thus. Then she sent for Ammon, of whose prowess with the cattle thieves she had heard. "The servants of my husband," she said to him, "have told me that thou art a

prophet of a holy God and that thou hast power to do mighty things. Go in and see the king."

Ammon did so. This, of all things, was what he had desired. "He is not dead," was his simple comment, "but sleepeth in God. On the morrow he shall rise again. Do you believe this?"

"If you say it is so," she answered, "I believe."

"Blessed art thou," Ammon went on. "Woman, there has not been such great faith among all the Nephites."

This statement throws light, not only on the queen, but also on the Nephite women in general.

She watched at the bedside of her husband from that time till he rose on the following day, believing that, as Ammon had predicted, he surely would rise. When this event happened, the king said, stretching out his hand to his wife, "Blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou. For as surely as thou livest, I have seen my Redeemer, who shall come forth and be born of a woman, and redeem all those who will believe on His name."

It was on this occasion that the queen with the rest, sank down, overpowered by the Spirit.

On being raised by Abish, she stood up on her feet and cried "with a loud voice," "O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God, have mercy on this people!" Her hands folded and her heart overflowing with joy, she said things that those present were unable to understand. Then, taking the hand of her husband, just as Abish had taken hold of hers, she revived him.

The Ammonite Mothers.

In a letter of Helaman to Moroni during the great war between the Nephites and the Lamanites, less than three quarters of a century before the coming of Christ in the flesh, we get a glimpse of a group of mothers in their influence over their sons. These, too, happen to be Lamanite women, but women who have become converted to the teachings of the Nephites.

Here, as you will remember, is the setting: The king and queen and Abish, with their whole people and some thousands in other Lamanite provinces, have joined the church. In order to save them from being slaughtered by the unconverted Lamanites, Ammon and his fellow missionaries conduct them to the land of Zarahemla, where they were well received by the Nephites and are given the Land of Jershon as their home. And here they live in peace, guarded by an armed force of their white neighbors.

You will recall, too, that, when the war broke out, these Ammonites, as they were called, were very much troubled in spirit over their not being able to fight for their country, because they had made a covenant never again to shed human blood. As the war progressed, however, their boys grew up

into young men. Not having sworn, as their fathers had, not to shed human blood, these boys might enlist—which they did with the eagerness of youth looking for adventure and the heroic deed. There were two thousand of them, and they were led by no less a person than the high priest, Helaman. “They were all young men,” says the record, “exceeding valiant for courage and also for strength and activity.” Not only so. “They were men who were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted.” Helaman calls them affectionately “my sons” and “my stripling Ammonites.”

I need not here recount the details of their adventure. That I have done in another chapter of this book. It is enough to know that in all the battles these young men fought—and they were in many and contested with absolute indifference to their own safety—not one of them lost his life, although everyone of them was wounded, more or less seriously. What is the secret of this fact?

Their mothers' teachings, declares Helaman, when their captain asked them how it was that they obeyed his orders with such exactness, they told him their mothers had taught them. And when he inquired into the cause of their absolute faith that they would not fall in battle, he received the same answer, “Our mothers did teach us!” Those devout women had burned into their hearts the thought—“if you do not doubt, God will deliver you from death by the sword.” It was a great tribute to the mothers of those two thousand boys—such a tribute as any mother, in whatever country or time, might well be proud of.

Estimate in Which Women Were Held.

Women, therefore, were held in high esteem among the Nephites, especially of the republic. Amulek, a companion of Alma on many of his preaching tours, speaks with reverence of women. The phrase “in defense of our wives and our children” formed a part of the Nephite battle cry, not only as an incentive for men to enlist, but also during an actual engagement. It was only in the last days of the nation that this estimate fell, that weapons of war were thrust into the hands of women and children.

Some of the Things Women Did.

As for the work women were required to do among this people, very little information is attainable by us now. In various places in the Book of Mormon we find statements to the effect that the women made “good homely cloth,” that they spun, and that they made silk and “fine-twined linen.” Doubtless, too, they prepared food for the household, looked after the education of the children, and in general did whatever was to be done about the home, meantime cultivating such feminine virtues as were deemed valuable in that age and under those conditions of life.



The above is a picture of Mrs. Joseph A. McGuire (center back row) of Honolulu, Hawaiian Mission; her mother, Mrs. S. K. Kaeo; her daughter, Mrs. George Lin; granddaughter, Mrs. Frank Rodrigues; and great granddaughter, Miss Evelin Rodrigues. Sister McGuire is well known to Hawaiian Missionaries, having entertained many of them in her home. She is an ardent Church worker in the Waikiki Branch; a faithful Relief Society teacher; and belongs to the Hawaiian Choir. She also does considerable temple work.