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## Characters and Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Lesson 7—The Formation and Dispersion of the House of Israel

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## *Theology*—Characters and Teachings of The Book of Mormon

### Lesson 7—The Formation and Dispersion of the House of Israel

Elder Leland H. Monson

For Tuesday, April 1, 1952

Objective: To gain an understanding of events which transpired in the Old World between the time of the Jaredite migration to the promised land and that of Lehi and his followers.

THIS lesson portrays the historical happenings which transpired in the Old World between the time the Jaredites left and Lehi left, a length of time of about 1600 years.

According to Biblical chronology, the Jaredites left the tower of Babel in the Euphrates Valley about 2247 B.C., and, under God's direction, migrated to the land of promise. These Jaredites, in time, became ripened in iniquity, refused to worship Jesus Christ, and were utterly destroyed. God saw fit in about 600 B.C. to bring a new colony to the land of promise under the leadership of Lehi, a prophet during the reign of king Zedekiah of the kingdom of Judah.

During the long interval between the migration of the Jaredites from the tower of Babel and the voyage of the colony of Lehi from Jerusalem, the house of Israel was nurtured in the "Fertile Crescent" and dispersed upon the face of the earth. The historian, James H. Breasted, defines the Fertile Crescent as:

. . . approximately a semi circle or territory with the open side toward the

south, having the west end at the southeast corner of the Mediterranean, the center directly north of Arabia, and the east end at the north end of the Persian Gulf. It lies like an army facing south, with one wing stretching along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and the other reaching out to the Persian Gulf, while the center has its back against the northern mountains. The end of the western wing is Palestine; Assyria makes up a large part of the center; while the end of the eastern wing is Babylonia (BREASTED, JAMES H.: *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World*, page 101).

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers run through this eastern territory. The earliest civilization in the Tigris-Euphrates history was built in the lower valley where the two rivers empty into the Persian Gulf. A fertile plain, seldom over forty miles wide, extends between the two rivers for about 170 miles in a northwesterly direction. On this plain of Shinar the Babylonian civilization was built after 2100 B.C.

The Assyrian civilization was built on the Tigris River in the northeast part of the Fertile Crescent. Fertile valleys extended up into the eastern and northern moun-

tains. In early times this territory was subject to the rule of Babylonia and the Hittites. "By 700 B.C. the Assyrian Empire included all of the Fertile Crescent" (*Ibid.*, page 155).

The great Chaldean civilization represented an empire in the old Babylonian territory between the Tigris and Euphrates and stretching northwest up the rivers. Babylon became the capital. Nebuchadnezzar, greatest of the Chaldean emperors, began his forty year reign 604 B.C., according to Breasted. He destroyed Jerusalem about 586 B.C. and took many Hebrew captives to Babylonia.

It was contemporaneous with these civilizations in the Fertile Crescent that the Lord formed and dispersed the house of Israel. In the twentieth century B.C. Terah, Abraham's father, was living in the land of Ur, of the Chaldees. He had departed from the ways of righteousness and had been following the practices of the heathens who offered men, women, and children as sacrifices to their idols. In connection with one of these sacrifices the heathen priests planned to use Abraham as the sacrificial victim.

During the time they were preparing him for the sacrifice, Abraham petitioned the Lord for help, and in answer heard his voice, saying:

Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father's house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of . . . Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father,

and my power shall be over thee (Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 1:16, 18).

Abraham left that land for the land of Canaan (Palestine) with his wife Sarai; his brother's son, Lot, and his wife. Later, Abraham's father joined him in the land they called Haran. Terah remained in Haran, where there were many flocks, and again drifted into idolatrous practices; but Abraham, warned of the Lord, departed to another land. The Lord said to Abraham:

Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice. . . . And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed, after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations (Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 2:6, 9).

Obedient to the instructions of the Lord, Abraham departed for the land of Canaan with his wife Sarai, Lot, and "the souls that we had won in Haran." Abraham sacrificed and prayed to the Lord as they came into the land of Canaan, which was occupied by an idolatrous nation. The Lord appeared to him and said, "Unto thy seed will I give this land" (Abraham 2:19).

Because of a famine in Canaan, Abraham concluded to go to Egypt. Before Abraham entered Egypt, the Lord instructed him concerning heavenly bodies, the creation of the world, and the pre-existent status of the spirits of men (Pearl of Great Price, Abraham, chapters 3, 4, 5).



Preceding the time of his entrance into the land of Canaan, Jehovah gave to Abraham a special blessing of the Priesthood, saying that "in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood) . . . shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal" (Abraham 2:11). This, of course, is only one part of the covenant which Jehovah had made with Abraham. The complete terms of the covenant may be summarized as follows: (1) Abraham was to be a great nation, (2) through him all the families of the earth were to be blessed, (3) his descendants were to inherit Palestine as an everlasting possession, (4) his descendants were to be as numerous as the dust of the earth or the stars of heaven, (5) kings and nations were to come of his descendants, (6) the covenant he made with God was to be an everlasting one or, as we would say, a gospel covenant. (SPEERY, SIDNEY: *The Spirit of the Old Testament*, page 22; cf. *Pearl of Great Price*, Abraham, chapter 2).

The covenant was confirmed to Isaac and to Jacob, son and grandson of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-8; 26:3, 4; 28:13-15). The following passage from Genesis, a message from the Lord to Rebecca, mother of Jacob, implies that Jacob was foreordained to be the leader in Isaac's house.

Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).

Jacob obtained the birthright and blessing from Isaac, and became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. The first time this name, Israel, appears in the Bible it is as a title given to Jacob. From a heavenly visitor, to whom he appealed for a blessing, he received the promise:

Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God, and with men, and hast prevailed (Genesis 32:28).

Later the title acquired a broader application, and was applied to the posterity of Abraham through the loins of Isaac and Jacob.

The twelve tribes of Israel accepted this title throughout the four hundred year period of their Egyptian bondage, during the forty years of exodus from Egypt to the land of promise, under the government provided by the Judges, and throughout the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon.

The twelve sons of Jacob, who formed the children of Israel, represent offspring from four women: Joseph and Benjamin from his beloved Rachel; Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun from Leah; Dan and Naphtali from Bilhah; and Gad and Asher from Zilpah.

During the time Joseph was in Egypt, he married Asenath, to whom two sons were born, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Levi was chosen to have the Lord for an inheritance, and not to have an inheritance in the same sense as the others. (See Numbers 8; 18:20-24.) With Levi eliminated, and with Joseph represented by his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, we have the twelve leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

About 930 B.C. the kingdom of Israel was divided. Part of the tribe of Benjamin and the tribe of Judah accepted Rehoboam, son of Solomon, as their king. The remainder of the tribes, commonly called the Ten Tribes, chose Jeroboam as their king. This latter group was called the kingdom of Israel, or sometimes the kingdom of Ephraim from its most prominent tribe.

This division represents the beginning of the decline of the children of Israel as a united political organization. By 750 B.C. the Assyrians, located in the northeast part of the Fertile Crescent, began their westward expansion. Damascus, after much desperate resistance, was slowly crushed, and fell in 732 B.C. The countries of the west were soon subdued and made vassal nations. By 700 B.C. all of the Fertile Crescent was included in the Assyrian empire (BREASTED, JAMES H.: *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World*, pp. 151-155).

It was about 721 B.C. that the kingdom of Israel, the Ten Tribes, met defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, and were carried away as captives. Since then they have been lost to history, and have been designated as the ten lost tribes.

The kingdom of Judah had an independent existence for more than a century, when it was subdued about 586 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the Chaldeans in Babylon. He destroyed Jerusalem and carried away the people to exile in Babylonia. They remained in subjection to the Chaldeans for about seventy years as prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:11, 12; 29:10).

The dispersion of Israel was now a matter of fact, though the Jews were to return to Jerusalem and to suffer from further dispersion subsequently. The Ten Tribes, known as the kingdom of Israel, under Assyrian captivity, had gone north and were lost to history. The kingdom of Judah was in Babylonian captivity, under Chaldean oppression.

The destruction of the Hebrew kingdom, by the Assyrians and Chaldeans had long been foreseen by the prophets of Israel. In the book of Isaiah (about 700 B.C.) is written in vivid oriental figures, "O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation" (Isaiah 10:5), which shows that Assyria was a means of smiting the Hebrews, because they were unrighteous. Jeremiah had also seen and prophesied concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, for he had foreseen its downfall.

Immediately preceding the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the captivity of the kingdom of Judah, Lehi, led by a divine hand, left Jerusalem for the land of promise. He belonged to the tribe of Manasseh, a son of Joseph. He took with him Ishmael, who was a descendant of Ephraim, another son of Joseph. The new civilization to be established in the land of promise was to be from the loins of Joseph, who was sold into Egypt. This new land had been given as an everlasting inheritance to Joseph. It is clearly evident, then, that not all members of the Ten Tribes or kingdom of Israel, went north. Representatives of the two tribes of Joseph became the "fruitful bough, even a fruitful



bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall" (Genesis 49:22). You may recall that another group also came. Mulek, a son of Zedekiah, last king of Judah, was brought to the promised land. We read in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman 9:21*:

And now will you dispute that Jerusalem was destroyed? Will ye say that the sons of Zedekiah were not slain, all except it were Mulek? Yea, and do ye not behold that the seed of Zedekiah are with us, and they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem? (See also *Jeremiah 52:10*.)

America was the land assigned to Joseph and his posterity, and the Lord made preparation for its development. Lehi, speaking to his son Joseph, who was a descendant of Joseph in Egypt, said:

And great were the covenants of the Lord which he made unto Joseph.

Wherefore, Joseph truly saw our day. And he obtained a promise of the Lord, that out of the fruit of his loins the Lord God would raise up a righteous branch unto the house of Israel; not the Messiah, but a branch which was to be broken off, nevertheless to be remembered in the covenants of the Lord (*II Nephi 3:4, 5*).

Our future lessons will consider the rise, decline, and fall of this civilization. It flourished in the Americas for over a thousand years.

### *Suggested Readings*

Pearl of Great Price, *The Book of Abraham*,  
II Nephi, chapter 3.

### *Questions for Discussion*

1. How were the tribes of Israel formed?
2. How were they dispersed?
3. What peoples did the Lord use to scourge Israel?

## *Visiting Teacher Messages*

### Book of Mormon Gems of Truth

Lesson 7—"I Have None Other Object Save It Be the Everlasting Welfare of Your Souls" (*2 Nephi 2:30*).

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For Tuesday, April 1, 1952

Objective: To help us appreciate the fact that there are many people who are interested in our everlasting welfare.

**I**N this text Father Lehi, that great Book of Mormon prophet, gives tender and solicitous advice to his sons. Truly this instruction is from the heart of a real father, for an honest parent strives to the best of his ability to instill righteous principles into the lives of his children. Almost all fathers and mothers have

the welfare of their children at heart, so far as they understand it.

But there are others, in addition to parents, who have our everlasting welfare at heart. How gratifying it is to know this. In this day when selfishness and greed are manifest on every hand, when bribes are given and received in return for person-