



Type: Magazine Article

Agriculture among the Nephites

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Source: *Juvenile Instructor*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (15 March 1880), pp. 71

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

Abstract: Deals with aspects of agriculture in the Book of Mormon.

AGRICULTURE AMONG THE NEPHITES.

BY G. R.

THE London *Punch* once asked Douglas Jerrold to write some advice to persons about to marry; to which request he complied in the single word, "Don't;" which, by the way, in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred, is the very worst advice he could have given. Were I asked to write a treatise on agriculture among the ancient Lamanites, our essay would be about as short; I should simply say, "the Lamanites were not an agricultural people." With the Nephites, on the contrary, it was entirely different. With them agriculture formed the basis of their prosperity, and was the leading industry through all their history.

No sooner had Lehi and his little colony arrived on the promised land, than they commenced the cultivation of the soil, planting therein the seeds they had brought with them from the land of Judea, which to their great joy yielded abundantly. The grains and fruits of the Asiatic continent were found to flourish as luxuriantly in the soil of America, as in their native land. This not only held good in the land of the Nephites' first inheritance, but also in the lands of their later possession—Nephi, Zarahemla, etc., as all through the Book of Mormon we have occasional references (incidental to the story of their history) to the success that attended their farming operations. Nor must it be imagined that their business was carried on in the primitive manner that characterizes the labors of Laman's degenerate descendants to-day. Agricultural machinery, and "all manner of tools of every kind, to till the ground," are mentioned by more than one writer.

Of cereals, corn, wheat and barley appear to have been, as in the land of their forefathers, the staple crops. If we mistake not, oats are never mentioned in the Bible, nor is rye spoken of more than once or twice. In the Book of Mormon, we have no recollection of the mention of either of these grains. On the other hand they appear to have cultivated grains with which we are unacquainted, known to them by the names of neas and sheum. Had there been any English equivalents to these words, we should doubtless have had them as in the other cases, instead of the original Nephite names.

All kinds of fruit flourished under their careful cultivation. Special reference is several times made to vineyards and grape culture, as well as to the manufacture of wine. Like the moderns, they understood the secret of fortifying or strengthening it with liquor or alcohol, of which knowledge they took advantage when paying tribute to the Lamanites, in cases when they intended to escape from their taskmasters while the latter were under the influence of this intoxicating drink.

It is evident from the sacred record, that the Nephites carried on their farming very much in the same manner, and for very much the same reasons, as the early settlers in Utah. When a new colony was planted, a town or village was built in a suitable location, somewhat after the style of our early forts. This city or settlement was generally named after the founder or the leader of the colony. The farming land contiguous was called by the same name. The land was tilled in every convenient place round the city, and when the Lamanites appeared, or other danger threatened, the people retreated into their place of refuge, in the center of their lands. As an example, we will cite the case of the followers of Alma, in the

land of Helam. When the army of the Lamanites made their unwelcome appearance, the people were mostly engaged in tilling the soil. At the coming of the dreaded foe, they gathered with all haste into the city, to await developments and to receive the counsel their wise, brave and good leader should give them. By his advice, the men went out of the city in a body, and made a treaty with the Lamanites, which the latter, as soon as their purposes were accomplished, failed to keep.

It is probable that in many parts of the continent, some system of irrigation was adopted to raise the crops. But this was not necessary in all portions of the Nephite possessions; we are inclined to think it was not so in the cultivated portions of the valley of the Sidon. Certain it is that when the righteous Nephi (the father of one of the Twelve Apostles chosen by Jesus from amongst the Israel of this western continent), called upon the Lord, at his request a famine desolated the land. The sacred historian records: "For the earth was smitten that it was dry, and did not yield forth grain in the season of grain." But when the people had repented and Nephi had pleaded in their behalf, it is written, "And it came to pass in the seventy-sixth year (B. C. 16), the Lord did turn away his anger from the people, and caused that rain should fall upon the earth, inasmuch that it did bring forth her fruit in the season of her fruit. And it came to pass that it did bring forth her grain, in the season of her grain." We judge from this, that in those days the Nephite agriculturist depended on the direct rains from heaven; for it appears that in the same year that they fell, the grain harvest was reaped, and the fruit harvest gathered. But it is unsafe to form positive theories on these points, until we fully understand the great changes that took place on the face of the land, with consequent alterations of climate, etc., at the time of the great convulsions that attended the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior.

Except in the days of their excessive pride and ungodly arrogance, the calling of the agriculturist among the Nephites, was a most honorable one, as in truth it should be among all people. King Mosiah, the beloved, reminds the people that, to prevent their taxes being grievous, he himself "did till the earth" for his support, and to maintain the expenses of the monarchy. With this royal example, it is no wonder that the farmer and the horticulturist were esteemed amongst the greatest of nature's noblemen.

The Nephites were also successful stock-raisers; their flocks and herds formed no inconsiderable portion of their wealth. The abundance of their horned stock, sheep, goats, wild goats, horses, "fatlings," etc., are frequently referred to. To this industry the Lamanites, who were great meat-eaters, also gave considerable attention. It was a business that suited their semi-civilization. It did not tie them down so completely to one spot, as did agriculture and manufactures. But it is a notable fact, that whenever any bodies of Lamanites passed over to the Nephites, they not only adopted the latter's religion and faith, but also their mode of living, and became skilled in the pursuits of industry. As an example, we read, in the days of the Judges, of many of these people joining the people of Ammon (their former brethren), when they "did begin to labor exceedingly, tilling the ground, raising all manner of grain, and flocks and herds of every kind." (Book of Mormon, new edition, p. 424).

NORMA can be great which is not right.