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Some Universals in the Book of Mormon

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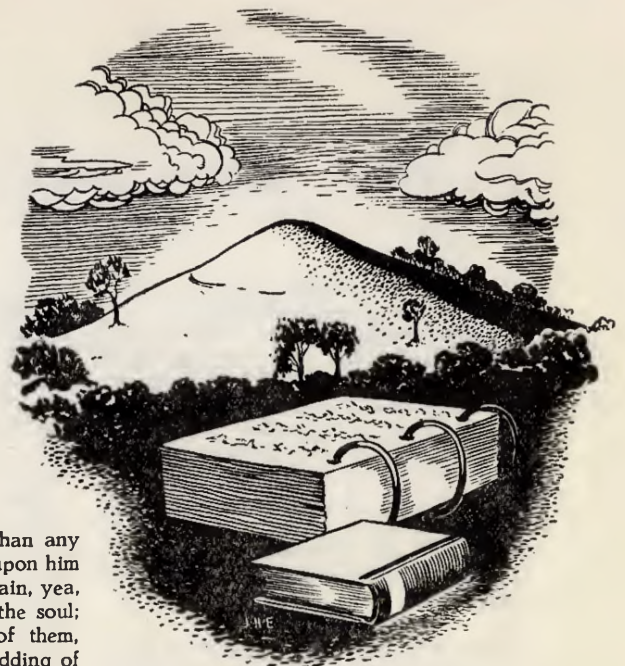
Abstract: This article states some universal teachings in the Book of Mormon, including the truth that all men are equal before God (1 Nephi 17:33-35, 2 Nephi 26:33); certain truths are found in all the world (Alma 29:8); spiritual truths may be tested and faith increased (Alma 32); men are that they might have joy (2 Nephi 2:30); when you serve men, you serve God (Mosiah 2:16-18).

SOME UNIVERSALS

IN THE

Book of Mormon

By DR. SIDNEY B. SPERRY
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



Illustrated by John Henry Evans, Jr.

BY a universal element is meant a statement of a bit of wisdom or teaching which has a comprehensive spiritual appeal to humanity at large. The golden rule of the Master is an unusually good illustration of what is meant. The examples found in the Book of Mormon are of very high merit.

At the outset we note that the title page of the Book of Mormon states that this scripture was written in part "to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself to all nations." *Manifesting himself to all nations!* There is no narrowness or particularism here. The message and doctrines of the book are and were intended for persons of every church, creed, and race, whether Jew or Gentile, Mormon or Methodist, black, brown, red, or white. The Fatherhood of God for all mankind pervades the book from beginning to end. The spirit of humility, faith, trust in God, sincerity, and love for man are inherent throughout. In fact, the good of man is the center and whole aim of it.

The reader will find a profound opposition to sin and oppression throughout the volume. In these days when we hear so much about the soul-destroying political doctrines of men, and of the attempts being made to shackle and regiment men by devious and sundry techniques, it is wholesome and soul-satisfying to note the spirit of free agency and democracy in the Book of Mormon:

Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins. Therefore, it came to pass that they assembled themselves together in bodies throughout the land, to cast in their voices concerning who should be their judges, to judge them according to the law which had been given them; and they were exceedingly rejoiced because of the liberty which had been granted unto them. And they did wax strong in love towards Mosiah;

yea, they did esteem him more than any other man; for they did not look upon him as a tyrant who was seeking for gain, yea, for that lucre which doth corrupt the soul; for he had not exacted riches of them, neither had he delighted in the shedding of blood; but he had established peace in the land, and he had granted unto his people that they should be delivered from all manner of bondage; therefore they did esteem him, yea, exceedingly, beyond measure. And it came to pass that they did appoint judges to rule over them, or to judge them according to the law; and this they did throughout all the land. (Mosiah 29:38-41.)

In this connection note another great passage in II Nephi 2:27:

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

AMONG the greatest of the universals to be found in the Book of Mormon is the one which sets forth the common position of all men before God. In I Nephi 17 we find Nephi instructing his brethren concerning the reasons why God permitted the Israelites to conquer the inhabitants of Palestine after crossing the Jordan. Nephi says:

And now, do ye suppose that the children of this land, who were in the land of promise, who were driven out by our fathers, do ye suppose that they were righteous? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. Do ye suppose that our fathers would have been more choice than they if they had been righteous? I say unto you, Nay. *Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God.* . . . (I Nephi 17:33-35. Italics ours.)

Here is courageously expressed the principle that, everything else being equal, all men stand in the same relation to God. There is no favoritism. The only thing that can change that relationship is sin and unrighteousness; God

definitely favors the righteous. One is reminded here of the stirring words of the prophet Amos when he said:

Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir? (Amos 9:7.)

The same principle is again expressed in different words by Nephi in a beautiful passage which we quote:

. . . he [the Lord] doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, *black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.* (II Nephi 26:33. Italics ours.)

It is the considered belief of the writer that doctrines such as expressed above will "prove" the Book of Mormon to the world more than anything we can do or say in its defense.

ANOTHER very interesting universal in the Book of Mormon has reference to the teaching of God's word among the nations. While the Lord would like to lift up and exalt all of his children, he knows, as all teachers know, that men are of unequal intellectual and spiritual capacities. Some individuals understand and receive truth with great facility and yield fruit an hundred fold; others receive it less readily and yield fruit tenfold or twofold; and still others find it hard to see the truth at all save in its barest outlines. Yet our Father views all of his children with love and compassion, and he does not desire those of little capacity to be held responsible

for truth in the same degree as those of large capacity. What we have said of individuals, the Book of Mormon seems to apply to nations in the following words:

For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true. (Alma 29:8.)

If this scripture is understood correctly by the writer, it seems that the sentiments expressed therein account for the fact that among most of the world's various literatures there are expressed certain basic gospel truths. In other words, God permits all peoples to have as much of his truth as they can assimilate and understand. The writer knows from actual experience how very difficult it is to explain to Arabs the fundamental principles of the gospel. Up to a certain point they comprehend and understand; beyond that they seem to be lost. If the Book of Mormon is correct, it would seem to be no accident that great leaders like Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Mohammed, and others have been raised up among various peoples of the world. These men have, in a measure, taught "his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they [the people] should have." We have no disposition to oversimplify the problem, but it has always seemed to us a remarkable fact, having great philosophical import, that only a small fraction of the world's peoples have any considerable insight into Christianity even when taught by capable individuals.

Whether one agrees entirely or in part with the Book of Mormon teaching here expressed, the fact remains that it has universal insight worthy of consideration.

IN the thirty-second chapter of Alma there is a great discourse on faith and how it may be acquired and made a practical instrument in spiritual life. Alma seems to have such confidence in the religious truths expounded by him that he is willing to have his words subjected to experimental trial. He preached to his hearers as follows:

But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, *even to an experiment upon my words*, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words. (Alma 32:27. Italics ours.)

The recognition that many teachings in the spiritual realm may be, and should be, tested by experiment is of universal interest and validity. What trouble and sadness may the world have been

spared had it recognized this principle! Moreover, it has the backing and blessing of no less a figure than Jesus of Nazareth who declared:

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine [teaching], whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. (John 7:17.)

There is a feeling of confidence, trust, and respect aroused in an individual when he is invited to experiment upon or test the validity of a religious principle. The Book of Mormon tells us that another prophet, by the name of Amulek, a friend and comrade of Alma's, emulated the example of the latter by exhorting his brethren to "plant the word in your hearts, *that ye may try the experiment of its goodness.*" (Alma 34:4. Italics author's.)

The Book of Mormon doctrine of experimentation or of testing the validity of religious teaching is interestingly applied by the last Nephite prophet, Moroni. Before sealing up the sacred gold plates of which he was the custodian, this great individual urged the future readers of the Book of Mormon to test the validity of its claims with a sincere experiment:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10:4.)

This great experiment in the spiritual realm is urged upon all men without distinction; if honestly and sincerely performed, any person may have the truth manifested concerning the claims of the Nephite scripture by means of the Holy Ghost.

BEFORE passing from Alma's sermon, let us notice another teaching of his which has universal elements in it. It concerns the principle of faith. After pointing out that faith and knowledge are two entirely different concepts, and, furthermore, that a person who knows the will of God is in a more responsible position before him than one who only believes, the prophet states:

And now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; *therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.* (Alma 32:21. Italics ours.)

This Book of Mormon prophet has his feet on the ground—when a person has faith he hopes for things which are not seen, *which are true.* This is clearer and in many respects a more satisfactory statement about faith than the one in Hebrews 11:1:

Now faith is the substance of things

hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1.)

Alma takes faith out of the realm of mere credulity—i.e., readiness to believe on slight evidence. There is a note in his statement which rings true to the critical mind. There are too many persons in every generation, including our own, who hope for things—fantastic things—in the name of faith and religion, but who give little thought as to whether or not they are based on truth.

The ancient problem of good and evil is of universal interest. The ancestors of the Nephites, the Hebrews, had no philosophic tradition in the Greek sense of the term. Moreover, the earliest Nephites seem, according to their own accounts at least, to have been simple, honest folk with few or no profound speculative interests. Consequently, the religion of the Nephites was simple, and they handled the problem of good and evil accordingly. Nowhere does the Book of Mormon make an attempt to solve it in the manner of the Book of Job. To the Nephite teachers all that is good comes from God, and evil comes from the devil:

For I say unto you that whatsoever is good cometh from God, and whatsoever is evil cometh from the devil. (Alma 5:40.)

Note also the teaching of Mormon:

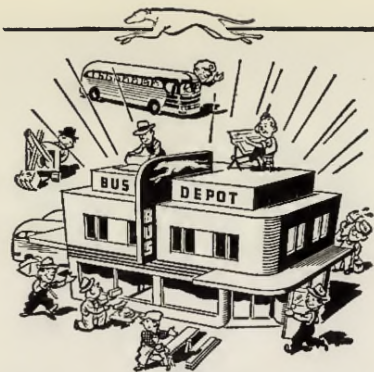
Wherefore, all things which are good cometh of God; and that which is evil cometh of the devil; for the devil is an enemy unto God, and fighteth against him continually, and inviteth and enticeth to sin, and to do that which is evil continually. (Moroni 7:12.)

In the instructions of Lehi to his son Jacob, there is to be found an interesting variation in the Nephite solution of the problem of good and evil. We may call it the doctrine of opposition-in-all-things. In terms of modern philosophy it might be denominated the theory of contrast-effect. Lehi says:

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. . . it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter. Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. (II Nephi 2:11, 15, 16.)

There are universal elements in this teaching acceptable even to some modern philosophers, though the latter might point out that there is entirely too much evil in the world for the purpose of contrast to good. While Lehi was probably not attempting to be philosophical, his sermon to his son is to the

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HUNGRY SHEEP

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Joan made a poor guess at his musings. "A man doesn't have to remain in a small town after he has outgrown it. But right now the *Gazette* needs you."

He turned, passionately. "I'm trying to save myself, Joan. You don't know what it would be like to live in that antiquated house without—Stan."

"I think perhaps I do."

Something in her throaty tone stirred him, deep down, where he was struggling to keep the loneliness under cover. He scrutinized her profile—lifted chin and intense gaze, pallid cheek, the thinness of which her flowing brown hair failed to hide.

"You don't think Stan died in my heart, do you?"

In pity he swept his eyes away from her struggling face. He felt the muscles of his own throat pulling painfully. "You stubborn little chaplain," he said thickly, "you won't even let yourself cry." After what seemed a long time he stood up jerkily and groped for her hand.

"I guess you win. To the ladies belong the—spoiled. I'll go back for a day or two—I've got to get you home." Joan telephoned while Paul was packing.

Now as he helped her to the curb, she felt the tremor of his hand. His conviction that he must protect her from unhappy memories had steeled him during the long ride, but the sight of the small streets with their immense trees and the sudden loom of his home had awakened his sleeping uncertainty. Joan slipped her arm through his and started resolutely up the path, but her heart, too, was fluttering with misgivings. What if she had done the wrong thing in bringing Paul back thus abruptly? She knew so little about illness—could over-strained nerves snap? In reality, the only thing she did know about Paul was his need for love. Could Mrs. Goodrich do as Joan had requested over the telephone, accept her son without pity?

As they entered the hall, Elizabeth welcomed them joyously in small, broken sentences, drawing them into the living room. Henrietta had risen. Struggling against tears, she stood swaying slightly, as though she were attempting to advance but found her feet too weighty. "Hello," he said, boyishly. She stretched out her arms, and the spontaneity of her smile lifted him. "Oh, Paul," was all she could manage. He placed her on the couch and sat beside her. In a few moments he took in the familiar walls, the oils, and heavy drapes, Stan's picture in his captain uniform, his own sketch of the lake.

"You kept everything just as it used to be, didn't you, Mom?"

"I tried to. But Elizabeth and I have had a long wait."

She lay back on the pillows weakly, clinging to his hand, hungry eyes on his face. Paul leaned nearer and discovered something about his mother he had never known before: Carefully guarded, beneath the artificiality, her heart burned with a fierce desire for affection. She felt the wave of his sympathy.

"I couldn't lose two sons," she said, shaken. "I didn't have the strength to lose two."

"You'll be all right, Mom," soothed Paul. "I'm an old stick-in-the-mud now, and I'm going to stick around here a long time."

Joan slipped out of the house and walked slowly down the steps, the velvet touch of night on her burning eyes. The street was as silent as the sky. As she reached the other side, the sheltering trees pushed their branches down to her. They knew. Paul will be precious to me—God, don't let this moment be of no avail! And then it was that the realization came to her, as in a flash: None of the great moments were ever lost. Unchanged, they lived to rush back, again and again, to shine above the dulling clouds of anguish. They were the understanding moments, springing from the well which lies deeper than culture or race.

SOME UNIVERSALS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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writer the most philosophical of any in the Book of Mormon.

BEFORE concluding, we call attention to two other passages in the Book of Mormon having distinct universal implications. The first, which is very commonly quoted by our people, throws light on the purposes leading to man's existence in mortality. It therefore refers to all men without exception. The passage reads:

Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (II Nephi 2:25.)

Men are that they might have joy!

All men, whether Americans, English, Russians, French, Germans, Japanese, Italians, Hottentots, or Burmese, were placed on this earth for the purpose of having joy. The word "joy" as used by Lehi in this scripture has no narrow connotations. The word, of course, has the usual dictionary meanings such as "the emotion excited by the acquisition or expectation of good," "gladness," "delight," "bliss," "gaiety," but far and beyond these Lehi seems to mean a way of life that will lead to eternal life

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Some Universals in the Book of Mormon

(Concluded from page 240)
in God's presence. As the Nephite prophet further states:

. . . I have none other object save it be the everlasting welfare of your souls. (II Nephi 2:30.)

There is a nobility to Lehi's words which all men must admire, whether or not they agree with his theology. He reaches out for men and encompasses them in the arms of love and understanding. The chaotic and war-ridden world in which we find ourselves desperately needs such men.

The second passage of scripture appropriately connects the service which men give each other with their service of God. A great Nephite king, Benjamin by name, in his old age gave a last sermon to his people. In it he said:

Behold, I say unto you that because I said unto you that I had spent my days in your service, I do not desire to boast, for I have only been in the service of God. And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God. Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another? (Mosiah 2:16-18.)

There are few finer sentiments than these to be found in all scripture. *When ye are in the service of your fellow beings, ye are only in the service of your God!* One need only find and serve his neighbor in order to find himself in the service of God. The only true self-service is to be found in this course.

The universal element in such teachings as Benjamin's justifies the assertion made about the Book of Mormon that "the good of man is the center and whole aim of it."

MY DAUGHTER

By Eddie C. Willis

YESTERDAY I held her tenderly against my breast
And rocked gently, as on her downy head
And sleepy eyes my lips I dreamily pressed;
Content to hold her thus—not daring to look ahead.

Today I packed her lunch and dashed away a tear
Her happy, shining eyes must not see;
This is her first day of school—her first year.
She'll learn to read and write—and not to miss me!

Tomorrow! She'll find her mate outside the old home walls;
She'll spread her wings and leave the family nest.
While gently o'er our graying heads life's twilight falls,
She'll hold a downy head against her breast.

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