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The Book of Mormon: Lesson 7 - Mosiah and the Elder Alma

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Guide Lessons for April

LESSON I

Theology and Testimony

(First Week in April)

MOSIAH AND THE ELDER ALM.

This lesson includes the matter between page 212 and page 251 of the Book of Mormon.

Excepting the disquisition of King Mosiah II on popular government and that of Alma the younger on religion, the lesson is mainly narrative. It gives, first, the escape of Alma the Elder and his people from the Land of Nephi to Zarahemla and his work in the Church there in behalf of the younger generation; second, the change in the political government of the Nephites from a kingdom to a sort of republic, due to the Nephite mission to the Lamanites and the cool temperament of the reigning monarch; third, the period of internal struggle among the Nephites, induced by the ambition of one Amlici, and the subsequent conflict with the Lamanites; and fourth, the conversion of Alma the younger, with the king's sons, and his early efforts to undo his first bad works and to build up both the political and the religious organization which had been placed in his efficient and trustworthy hands. In outline form this material would appear as follows:

1. Alma the Elder on his way to Zarahemla.
 1. At Helam:
 - (a) Approximate location with regard to the Lands of Nephi and Zarahemla.
 - (b) Conditions there.
 - (c) Arrival of Lamanites—results.
 - (d) Departure to Zarahemla.
 2. Arrival at Zarahemla.
 - (a) Dual people there.
 - (b) Comparative number of each.
 - (c) Reception of newcomers.
 3. New duties of Alma.
2. The Younger Generation:
 1. Whom this younger set consists of.
 2. Causes and results of their defection.
 3. What was done about it:
 - (a) Alma's difficulty in the situation.
 - (b) The king's attitude.

- (c) Solution.
3. Alteration in the Nephite government :
 1. Form of government before this.
 - (a) Trace the rulers up to now.
 - (b) Tell how they acted toward the people.
 - (c) Give the occasion for the change.
 2. Nature of the new government.
 - (a) The grades of judges.
 - (b) Their relation to one another.
 - (c) Their relation to the people.
 3. Its workings.
 4. Strife under the new regime.
 1. Nehor.
 - (a) Who he was.
 - (b) His ideas.
 - (c) What was done about him.
 2. Amlici.
 - (a) Who he was.
 - (b) His pretensions.
 - (c) Conflict with him.
 5. Alma the Younger.
 1. His education and early associations.
 2. His early character and purposes.
 3. His conversion.
 4. Subsequent events.
 - (a) Elevation to the priesthood and chief judgeship.
 - (b) Characteristics of his ministry.
 - (c) His message to the Nation (pp. 245-51).

OBSERVATIONS.

1. This lesson is filled with big ideas, religious, political, and social.

Mention has been made on more than one occasion in the course of these lessons of the necessity of going to original sources for our knowledge of spiritual things. An idea so fundamental cannot be too often called to our attention. Anyway, it occurs over and over again in the Book of Mormon. And one of the outstanding occasions for mention of it once more occurs in the present lesson.

A "document" has been placed in the hands of King Mosiah, which is in an unknown tongue. Instead of puzzling over it and beating his brain about its contents, he proceeds to use his prophetic office to decipher it. With the plates was found an instrument called a urim and thummin, and this he employs in the translation of the foreign language. The result is that the tragic story of the Jaredites is unfolded before the Nephites.

Alma the Younger, although he was instructed in religion by

his gifted father and by means of such literature as the Nephites had, yet he does not depend on that source for his information concerning divine matters. "How do you suppose", he asks the people, "that I know of a surity of the things of which I have spoken?" And he answers with great emphasis, "Behold, they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God, and I do know for myself that they are true. Moreover," he adds, "it has been revealed to me that the words that have been spoken by our fathers, are true."

Thus these two men were qualified to speak on the things of the spirit, not because they had conversed with prophets or pored over books, but because they had contacted with beings and powers in another world.

Then look at just one of the political ideas that are in this lesson.

Mosiah believes that the people should have a say as to who should rule them. Or strictly speaking, he believes they should govern themselves. In other words he accepts the idea which lies at the very basis of our modern American Government, expressed in the phrase the Voice of the People. "It is not common", he says in a very fine sentence, "that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right * * * * And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come, with great destruction." If any American of modern times has better expressed a belief in democratic government than that, we have not come across it.

And then there is that age-old doctrine, so repugnant to most people in practice and so much vaunted in theory, the doctrine of social equality—a doctrine too on which the Lord has thrown every possible emphasis through all his prophets in all ages of the world. "Thus saith the Lord," says the Elder Alma. "Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another."

This was given as a reason against the doctrine of kingship. To have a king means that one person is lifted above the people. And this in turn means the building of an aristocracy—lifting a group, or class, of persons above the masses. This democratic doctrine the Nephites of this period carried out in practice. For Benjamin and Mosiah "worked with their hands" so as not to become a burden to the people. And even the religious teachers, including the high priest, earned their living by manual labor. Their society however was of the primitive sort, not highly specialized and complex like ours.

2. No doubt these ideas come to the surface at this particular time in Nephite history because of the very high character of the leaders during this period—Mosiah and the two Almas. For all

three men were exceptionally endowed with intellect and moral fiber.

We have already mentioned the fine moral courage of the Elder Alma, as instanced when he broke with his iniquitous colleagues and the king. His son Alma, it seems, had the same rare quality, as shown when he invited the ridicule (and doubtless received it a-plenty) of his companions and followers at the time of his conversion. To break with the past, whether that past be either wrong or merely conventional, places a heavier tax on our moral stamina than most people imagine, who have not been put to the actual test.

And then, most of all, observe the great clearness of vision, coupled with courage, exhibited by Mosiah when he changed the form of political government. He was king. His eldest son would, in the course of events, be King after him. And what father does not wish his children and his children's children held up in the spotlight? But Mosiah is more anxious for the welfare of his people than he was that the kingship should remain in his family. And so he made it impossible for his sons, any or all of them, to do so. And so he made it impossible for his sons ever to change their minds, bring division and probably bloodshed to the Nephite nation. Mosiah was under no illusion as to his children, as most parents are. He knew human nature. He knew that his sons were made of the same clay as other men. And who could tell how long they would retain the Spirit of God?

3. Another very illuminating observation grows out of our contact with such characters as Mosiah, the two Almas, and Ammon (of whom we shall hear presently). We mean the tremendous grip that spiritual things have on the human soul.

People who have never had any spiritual experiences often sneer at the knowledge that religious persons claim to have of the unseen forces of the universe, as if the only matters of which the human mind can have any real knowledge are material. The truth is, as President Brigham Young long ago asserted so positively, that there is no knowledge whatever that is at once so sure-footed, so definite and certain and so dependable as the knowledge that comes from a well-defined spiritual experience. In other words, when the Lord reveals anything to you you know it better and more surely than you can know anything in the merely sensuous world. And it is both silly and ignorant for what Professor William James used to call "toughminded" persons to discredit a spiritual experience on the ground that it was not founded in the senses.

It is doubtless on account of this absolute sureness of knowledge that great conversions like that of Alma and Ammon, in the Book of Mormon, and of Saul of Tarsus, in the New Testament, are so crucial, so shattering to old ideals, so powerful in

directing the life into new channels, so steadying to faith in the divine. For only on this assumption of knowledge—and knowledge too of the most assuring sort—can we account for the conduct of such men as these. Alma endured contumely and persecution, Ammon suffered hardships and privation, and Paul invited martyrdom, by merely following the light which never was on land or sea. And strong-willed, intellectual men like them would not have done so for a will-o-the-wisp.

Coupled with the sureness of spiritual knowledge is the very singular thing that no sooner is a person taken hold of by a spiritual experience than he is restless till the whole world comes under the spell of the same influence. It is characteristic when Galileo discovered the great potential fact that a pound of lead and a pound of feathers reached the ground at the same time when dropped from the tower of Pisa, or when, a few days ago, two young scientists discovered that hydrogen is a compound and not an element, these men did not feel an irrepressible urge to spend the rest of their lives showing people that these were facts and not illusions. But when Alma and Ammon and Paul came to know that Christ opens the way to salvation, they could rest neither night nor day as long as anyone remained ignorant, through fault of theirs, of this redemptive truth.

It is indeed a marvelous thing, and a wonder.

Questions

1. Relate the story of how Alma and his converts escaped to Zarahemla.
2. Explain the change that took place in the political government of the Nephites at this period.
3. Tell about Nehor, about Amlici.
4. Relate the conversion of Alma.
5. Why should the "younger generation" be slow in accepting religion?
6. What is the difference between a "democrat" and an "aristocrat"?
7. Can you think of a situation in which your love of honor for a child would conflict with the welfare of your people or community?
8. Why should Alma "rejoice" when he was told that his son had fallen to the ground and been stricken dumb?

References.

1. The text pp. 212-251.
2. The "Dictionary of the Book of Mormon" and the "Story of the Book of Mormon" by George Reynolds.
3. "Message and Characters of the Book of Mormon," by John Henry Evans.