



**The Lesson of  
Sixth Century B.C.**

Hugh W. Nibley

N-LES

**Nibley Archive**

FOUNDATION FOR  
ANCIENT RESEARCH AND  
MORMON STUDIES

F.A.R.M.S.  
P.O. BOX 7113  
UNIVERSITY STATION  
PROVO, UTAH 84602 (c) 1984



**FAIR USE COPYING NOTICE:** These pages may be reproduced and used, without alteration, addition or deletion, for any nonpecuniary or non-publishing purpose, without permission.

# THE LESSON OF THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.

*by Hugh W. Nibley*

I would like to talk for a few minutes about a great man and a great century. We neglect the past in our society yet it can give us a perspective of our own times that nothing else can give. It can make us see ourselves as the future will see us. In the case I'm going to discuss today it will enable us to see an old record in a new light. The only old record, by the way, that any of us have ever read, or many of us. You see, the ancients didn't write in English and it so happens that there's just one ancient record in the world that can be critically studied in a modern language, that's the Book of Mormon. At the beginning of the present century, anyone wishing to find out about the world of Lehi would probably begin by reading Rollinson's ancient history or Rawlin's ancient history and there he discovered that Lehi, assuming that he lived at all, must have moved in a world peopled by puppets and shadows, the exotic half-world of the ancient East as our grandfathers knew it. Rollinson's sources were Greek writers who's first tangible contacts with the past went back but a little beyond 600 B.C.. For him as for them Cyrus Semeticus, and Nebuchadnezzar were the Kings of old and beyond lay only legend. If our student were to consult the proud German scientific scholarship of the day he'd soon learn the meaning of Neber's observation that ancient history is always treated as if it had never really happened. It is a thesis, a demonstration, an intellectual exercise but not a real account of real people. Ingrained in our subconscious, says a recent study on antiquity Agon Friedel's latest work, is a disbelief in the actual existence of those times and persons which haunts us through the schools and in the theaters and in the libraries and impregnates the whole concept of antiquity. Artificiality is to this day the very substance of ancient history. But to try to fit a real Lehi into such a make-

believe world could only lead to trouble, you can see that. For example, you no sooner come to the second verse in the first chapter of the Book of Mormon that we're confronted by a whole question of Egyptian culture in Palestine but nobody knew anything about that till the last 20 years or so. Through all these centuries this is what the author just quoted. "Through all these centuries Egypt had disappeared; its pyramids and pharaohs had become legends. Egyptian darkness lay over the land of the Nile. All anyone knew about it was what the books of Moses and along with that some eerie hocus-pocus." Well that's what Joseph Smith had to go on. Throughout the nineteenth century those who sought evidence for the Book of Mormon did well to go to the Indians, those living traditions, which represented far more a vital link with the past than any fumbling speculations of the academicians. But of recent years the picture's greatly changed. If we had lost much of the new world in the passing of a century we've discovered a good deal of the old. Lehi lives not at the beginning of the ancient times as he did up till quite recently but almost at the end of them. This century some have claimed was the greatest of all centuries from the beginning to end it produced more innovating geniuses, more epic making firsts than any or perhaps all other centuries combined. That's a great claim to make for a century. The overall picture of that marvelously dynamic age can't be over-looked in the study of the Book of Mormon, for Lehi was a child of that century, steeped in its culture. When they crossed the waters he and his people took with them a specific cultural baggage, that of the sixth century and the Near East. They never forgot that they were a lonesome and estranged people, cut-off from the mainstream of civilization, and they never ceased to remember and to cherish their cultural origin. Not merely the opening pages, but every page of the Book of Mormon, then, must bear the stamp of its ultimate origin. Here is a most interesting control. When we say that Lehi was a child of this century, we mean that he was a strange combination of a dreamer and a man of action, an idealist and a realist, an adventurer and a hard-headed leader -- a combination for which the sixth century B.C.

was noted. Now consider some of his contemporaries. There was Solon, whose lifetime (his span of life) matches Lehi's exactly, and who spent a good deal of time travelling in the East and in Egypt as a merchant, visiting the same important centers that Lehi knew. This Solon of Athens the Greeks always regarded as the wisest and best representative of their race. He was a gifted poet, and able soldier, and incurable idealist, a great political theorist; he was actually the real founder of Greek democracy, he was a first-rate businessman who never made much money, we are told, but thoroughly enjoyed travelling all over the world, building up a reputation for sagacity and honesty that has made his name proverbial to this day. Here Prof. Linford says -, "Solon must have carried many a cargo of oil or pottery from his own rocky Attica to the wealthy cities across the Aegean." And in spite of his love for his own native land, he must have been charmed by the brilliant society which he found in Asia. He may have been tempted into luxury and prodigality and Fredac (?) supposed, when he offered an excuse for such habits and trials, in excuse for such habits, the trials and dangers of a mercantile career. You remember that Laman and Lemuel were tempted into luxury and prodigality in the same setting. Solon himself, Aristotle tells us in the constitution, was a man who by birth and by reputation belonged to the highest class. But his business activities and limited means placed him in the middle class. Well, one of the best-known tales of antiquity is told in Herodotus of Solon's visit to Croesus, the richest man in the world, whom he gently rebukes for his pride; but in the end he learns wisdom from Solon, and with his dying breath, or what he thought was his dying breath, Croesus called upon the name of Solon. Yes, he was a remarkable man. And Solon's words astonishingly resemble those of the prophets of Israel, for he was before all else a preacher of righteousness. If you were to find this, for example, in a Jewish Apocrypha or Christian work, you wouldn't be at all surprised that this is Solon speaking. "Behold, the inhabitants of the city of Ear-minded (?) to bring about the destruction thereof through their love of gain. They who lead them are of treacherous minds, that verily sorrow and lamentations are about to fall upon

them in their pride. Behold they know not to contain their lands; they heed not the holy foundations of righteousness (and the word he uses for righteousness, Decai (?) is probably comparable to the Hebrew Tsuenic (?), that the contemporary prophets were using in the same sense.). Well, says Solon, Tsevis decai (?) justice in silence lets things take their course until the latter end, when surely comes the time of retribution. Behold, the dire destruction cometh upon all the city and there is none who shall escape. The people have been quick to do iniquity and to bring themselves into bondage. As if it had fallen to a foreign enemy, the cherished city is wasted away and consumed by those secret combinations which are the delight of evil men. Thus, evil worketh its way among the people, and many of the poor and needy are loaded with shameful chains and sold into bondage in foreign lands. No man finds security within his own gates, for evil leapeth over the high wall and finds him out, even though he hideth himself in the secret recesses of his inner-most chamber. Now that isn't a Hebrew prophet; those are lines quoted by Demosthenes in his oration on the false embassy, and written by Solon about the year 600 B.C.. How like some of the prophets they sound and so might Lehi have spoken to Jerusalem. Solon has left us much more vein. He too was a preacher of righteousness, and it should never be forgotten that it was this man standing absolutely alone, as he tells us, like a wolf holding his own against a great pack of dogs, closing in from every side. By this courage he was able to give Athens her constitution and later preserved it from destruction and thus did more than any man for the cause of popular government in the world to this day. Truly he was one of the noble men of the earth.

Another who visited the East on business in Lehi's day may have been a personal friend of Thales and Maelitus (?). He's nothing less than the father of western Philosophy and Science. His mother was a Phoenician, and he received most of his education in Egypt. That gives him much of the same cultural background, you see, as Lehi - - Syrian and Egyptian. He can be dated by an eclipse which he predicted in the year 585, that is

within a year or two of the destruction of Jerusalem. We see he's strictly a contemporary of Lehi here. Asked all the sons of Phalys (?) when they laughed at him, as being a dreamer (remember, they laughed at Lehi for being a dreamer), and for being a practical man to teach his critics a lesson he turned his remarkable intelligence to business and in a short time succeeded in cornering the local market in olive oil, thereby acquiring great wealth. The story's worth quoting here. Plato tells a like story in the Theotitus (?), but this is what Aristotle tells us in Politics. He says when they make fun of him because of his poverty, showing how useless his philosophy was to him, it is said that he made a study of weather conditions and estimated what the olive crop would be for the coming season. And while it was still winter he borrowed a little money, and bought-up all the olive presses used in oil manufacture in Maelitus (?) and Kaios (?), getting them for a song since nobody thought they'd be worth very much. But when a bumper crop came along, there was a sudden overwhelming demand for olive presses, and Phalees (?) was able to get whatever he asked for his. So by making a pile of money, and Aristotle says a pile of money, Phalees demonstrated that it was easy for intelligent men to get rich if they put their minds to it. And in the next sentence Aristotle used the word 'monopoly'; he says Phalees got a monopoly, and that's the first occurrence of the word in literature, anywhere. Well, after Phalees got rich then he returned to a life of thought; but it wasn't to thought devoid of action. Like Solon he remained all his days a traveler and a man of the world, going from city to city and from land to land, imparting freely of his great scientific and political knowledge to all who asked for it. Among other things he drafted a constitution for the United States of Greece. What an advanced century that was. These men weren't freaks or misfits in their days; they've been had in every age as the noblest representative of their time. They're usually numbered, in fact, among the so-called seven wise men, all of whom were strictly contemporary with Lehi. All of whom combined great powers of imagination with sound practical sense and unshakeable moral integrity. Hence their reputation for wisdom. They're all supposed



to have lived at the same time; they're supposed to have feasted together, stories are told about their banquets and their conversations and so forth. These are the wisest men who've ever lived, and they were all contemporaries of Lehi, and they were all active politicians and colonizers, for no century could rival the sixth in importance of its political developments. That century saw, not only in Palestine but throughout the world, the final collapse of the old sacral kingship. And into the vacuum it left behind rushed all sorts of political parties and theories. Almost every city in the world was torn between oligarchal, dictatorial, and democratic factions (such as Jerusalem was) in a desperate struggle to establish a new principle of authority and government. Even in the East where monarchy continued its sway the greatest figure of the sixth century is Cyrus the Great, the ideal philosopher-king whom the Jews and the Greeks die in honoring for ever after. We're told that Cyrus' chief counselor was Ctesias, and Ctesias had his wisdom from Solon. All these men knew each other. Well, it is not without significance that Lehi counted among his contemporaries not only the greatest first names in science, and art, and politics, and even business (For Ctesias belonged to his generation) but the most illustrious religious founders in history. Others are lost in the midst of history, but consider all these: Gautama Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu (?) the founder of Jainism, Zoroaster, Pythagorus - - all of Lehi's day. All strictly contemporaries. The only question has been about Zoroaster; now it's generally believed that he died (he was killed) about 582 or 583, in other words, the same time that Jerusalem fell. So he was contemporary too. Well all these founders and religious men were seekers for light, and whatever degree of success they may have enjoyed, their lives are an eloquent commentary on the unparalleled display of physical, mental, and spiritual energy that renders the century of Lehi unique among all others. It was an unsettled age of big ideas and big projects, and time of individual enterprise and great private fortunes, flourishing precariously under the protection of great rival world powers, everlastingly intriguing and competing for markets and bases. A strange, tense, exciting, and very brief moment of



history when everything was with the future. No other moment of history was more favorable for the transplanting of civilizations, so heavily burdened with the heritage of the past, or so rich in promise, but there are a few things about this transplanting of civilization. These theories of adventurous quests, of widening horizons, the urge to assimilate all the past and master it, is so characteristic. A relentless compulsion to achieve - - all in the sixth century. Embodied and idealized in the figures of the seven wise men it was a great age of colonization. Everyone was taking part in new settlement projects. A dozen Greek poets of the time tell us about them. Following the practices established, small bands of people, relatives and friends, would go forth under the direction of able and daring leaders, looking for places to settle and try their luck. These places were scouted out ahead of time, things quite systematically run; that was the method - - everyone was travelling, looking for promised land. By the sixth century pickings were pretty poor. The Mediterranean was already a closed sea, and finally in the year 530 the Straits of Gibraltar were completely closed, the Phoenicians allowed no ships to pass through them at all. The great maritime powers fiercely competed for zones of control, in Lehi's day. Merchants were already moving along the Atlantic seaboard and into the heart of Asia, and still many ambitious programs of exploration were indicated. One of Lehi's contemporaries, Neko (?), sailed clear around Africa from the East to West. Clear around Africa, though Neko was in charge of the expedition he didn't go with it, in the days of Lehi. And another Phoenician, Hanolia (?) tried to do the same thing from the West to the East and took a large colony clear down to Cape Verde. To explain how a lot of Near East artifacts got to America, Mr. Gladam (?) assumed that part of a great exploration fleet originally organized by Alexander the Great made a voyage across the Pacific to the new world. Well, that's raised many objections and the dates have been disturbingly late, but Gladam didn't have any other choice because he didn't know of any other expeditions. Why didn't he? Because they were very secret. Paul Hermann recently wrote a very good book which has been

translated into English now on that subject. These explorations, settlements, and commercial projects of the big maritime corporations were highly competitive and very secret. So it's not surprising that while we find unmistakable evidence of their activity everywhere, from Britain to Central Africa and from the East Indies, it's very difficult to discover any actual accounts of the undertakings.

Lehi is as very skillful at covering his moves, as the Book of Mormon tells he was, the other great merchants and colonizers were just that - - they had to be. Well let's consider Lehi; just read the first two chapters of 1st Nephi and what do you get? Uriah doesn't belong to the imagined orient of 50 years ago. He's at home in a very different kind of world, and a very real one. In the brief compass of Nehpi's account, which is an abridgement of his fathers own journal, he tells us whose style it imitates and continues . . . we are given an amazing amount of information, both general and particular in regards to conditions in Lehi's day. Uriah was a man we are told who was possessed of exceeding great wealth in the forms of gold, silver, and all manner of precious things. He had his own house in Jerusalem, (these are all quotations), yet he made it a point to go forth from the city from time to time. And the land of his inheritance was some distance from the town. He came from the old distinguished family from the tribe of Manasseh, and Manasseh - - of all the tribes - - still retained the old ways and customs of the desert, and they were the most active caravan people among the Hebrews. He seems to have had particularly close ties with Sidon, which was at that time the most important world center of international trade, and it was the one harbor through which the Israelites had to carry on their trade with Egypt and the West. The one port that would be known to any merchant. He was proud of his knowledge of Egyptian, and insisted on his sons learning it. So, he tells us (we learn from his parables, the long-winded stories he tells) that he's somewhat of an expert in the vine, the olive, the figant (?) of honey culture, we learn from one episode. Put these things together and what do you have? A perfectly consistent and convincing picture of Lehi, the merchant. There was only one way to

acquire exceeding great wealth in Lehi's day; (this had been studied quite thoroughly recently - - the subject of the ancient merchants) only one way to acquire exceeding great wealth, unless you were connected with the court, and that was not by running a shop in Jerusalem or a farm in the suburbs, it was by large-scale trade and commerce.

This was a time, we are told, when Phoenician galleys filled the mouths of the Nile, and Semitic merchants thronged the delta. See, their business was with Egypt. Lists of goods imported into Egypt from Palestine show that the great men of the East took the gold of Egypt in return for their wine, oil, grain, and honey, the first three items far out-classing the others in importance. Lehi's intimate knowledge of Egyptian, his travels, his proximity to and his familiarity with the desert, the mass and variety of his precious things, his connections with Sidon, his knowledge of vine and oil, olive culture, the prominence and sophistication of his family, his own behavior, a remarkable combination of courtesy and firmness, gentleness and toughness, caution and daring, all combine to give us one of the most imposing and sympathetic figures in antiquity, the great merchant prince of the East. We should talk about the great merchant prince; Hugo Winkler wrote about them long ago, but quite recently Paul Hermann in his book has a lot to tell us about them. Men of courage, enterprise, great daring, had to possess the peculiar qualities that Lehi did. It's just as clear that Lehi was a visionary and a dreamer. He was greatly worried about the future of Jerusalem. His prayers and studies went on and on and were finally rewarded by an apocalyptic vision. His attempts to make this public were met by a violent negative reaction which put his life in danger. Now, isn't this interesting that at the same time, Solon went forth to preach to the Athenians in the marketplace, and he had to feign insanity to avoid being mobbed and put to death. He wore a funny cap and pretended he was crazy, otherwise they would have killed him. And that parallel is not without significance. Since in the years that followed Solon preached only one thing to his city, and that was repentance.

After being severely rebuffed, Lehi was ordered in a dream to take his family and depart into the wilderness. From then on he shows himself as a great leader and colonizer. he was daring, and resourceful and strong-minded. And so he takes his place among the Titans of the sixth century - - a seeker after righteousness, a prophet, a poet, a leader, and a founder of nations. Well weren't they just as much prophets as he? And wasn't he just as much a philosopher as they? No, there's a remarkable difference here. In one thing he stands apart from all the others. He alone found what they all sought. Now we have hundreds, Barkofsky has collected hundreds and hundreds of sayings, aphorisms, of the seven wisemen. And we have a lot of them from Solon; Solon's are the most famous. And this is the most famous saying of Solon's: "No mortal ever knows real joy", he says; "All upon whom the sun shines down are miserable wretches". That was Solon's summary of his life's experience. And that happens to be the one saying that has been attributed to all the seven wisemen. Disillusionment and resignation is the sum and substance of their wisdom. They didn't have the answer, and they didn't know anyone who did. In *The World and the Prophets* we quoted another of Solon's final verdicts on the meaning of life. He says, "Like gaping fools we amuse ourselves with empty dreams." Don't doubt it - - insecurity follows all the works of men, as a merchant he'd know that, you see. And no one knows when he begins an enterprise how it will turn out. One man trying his best to do the right thing steps right into ruin and disaster, because he can't see what's ahead; while another behaves like a rascal and not only escapes the penalty of his own folly, but finds himself blessed with all kinds of success. So in the end, Solon says, what can you look forward to? In this life, or in eternity. Just to this he says, "to death, or dire disease, or the creeping evil of old age". That's all there was for Solon in this life or any life, and that was the same thing with the others. The depressingly negative nature of their message is painfully clear, in Barkofsky's large collection of the sayings of the wisemen of old. But how different it was with Lehi. Here was one man who did have the answer - - but he got it the only way it could come; he

was miserable, he was depressed, until he got the answer. He worried and fretted, and brooded a great deal. He was in an awful state, we are told. But then he got the answer, and then what happens? His son tells that his soul did rejoice, his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him.

Well, viewing the world of Lehi, one is lead to certain reflections. The description of Lehi and his society, as set-forth in the Book of Mormon, is a powerful argument for the authenticity of Lehi's record. Nothing was known of the world until quite recently. To the student of the Book of Mormon it's significant that Lehi's time was particularly auspicious for the birth of new civilizations. You could see that, because here was the founding of a new world; a great civilization that was to ramble-on on its own momentum, for a thousand years and more. The sixth century, like the nineteenth, seems to swarm with men of great stature. Founders of enduring nations and institutions. The twentieth century, on the other hand, seems to produce only technicians. We might be led to a significant reflection in that regard; there's a lesson in that for our own times. We won't take it up though. The case of Lehi teaches us equal respect for thought and action. In our own day thinkers, or technicians, act very little, and shun responsibility, while men of action think very little and pride themselves on never finding time to read. The men of the sixth and the nineteenth century believed that thinking was more than scheming and planning to get ahead; it was a deep and prayerful contemplation, and they were not ashamed to ask for dreams and visions. The hours they spent alone with the Lord made them mighty in action.

Well, this introduces a theme which receives great emphasis in the Book of Mormon, namely, that God's dealings with men are on a scale and in ways that none of us can begin to comprehend. The Lord has favored nations and individuals in times and places we dream not of. So it's time for us to become aware of this in the twentieth century, if we're to bequeath to history anything greater than commercial jingles.



History, says Travelian, enables us by the light of what men once of been to see the things we are, and dimly describe the form of what we should be. And no history can do that better for us than the Book of Mormon.

Here is a lesson for our own times; what would one have said of the future of the world in 600 B.C.? Why, that within three hundred years, with such booming, with such economic success, with so many great men, with such scientific and philosophical brains around, man will have learned all the secrets of nature and brought the Millenium. But let us visit the earth three hundred years later, and what do we find? There've been no great natural calamities, the vast majority of the race have enjoyed almost unbroken peace and security, wars are now being fought by small professional armies, things are pretty safe for other people, but where are the signs of progress we expected? Only in the accumulation of gadgets. There's a marvelous technical development, but it's already showing signs of decline. We're talking about the third century now. Gadgets have accumulated but brains have not. The world swarms with PhD's, bright, ambitious men, but there are no great men. For degrees are gadgets, and can be turned-out in any desired amount. Administration has become a fine art by the third century, but thinking has become a lost art. The third century B.C. was a world of technicians and educators, but as the educators made their courses easier and easier, the number of competent new technicians being turned-out became less and less. The slogans of education for living and education for success completely stifled research within two generations of Aristotle, and soon applied research followed suit. Even the modest minimum quota of technicians failed to reproduce itself, and so the amazingly advanced and sophisticated techniques of the ancients, useful and appreciated as they were, were all completely lost. Let that be a lesson for us. Again, after the immense promise of the past three centuries we are turning-out only technicians and educators. Again, even with the universal and unparalleled population we are unable to keep up even a poor minimum of technicians necessary to keep our machines going. The

lowering of technical standards has become alarming . Take this field of ancient history to which I have been talking. Fifty years ago, if one were to address a large body of college students, most of them would be pretty sure to understand our historical allusions, and to be able to read at least one body of ancient texts in the original. Yet the college curriculum of that time would have presented, at most, one modest course in ancient history. Today what do we find? In our university catalog I've counted at least a hundred advanced courses in Greek and Roman studies. Yet neither the students that take the courses nor the large staff that teaches them can read a line of ancient text at sight. We have the gadgets, but where are the brains? One student has written, "regiments of workers equipped with costly machinery are busy searching out, digging up, acquisitioning, classifying, cataloging, preserving, reproducing, disseminating, explaining, displaying, and even selling the documents of the past, doing every conceivable thing with the documents but reading them. There is no one that can read them. They are waiting for the reading machine that will never come."

If we are to avoid the fate of the ancient world, the sterility of the third century, we can do no better than the men of the sixth century did, and turn to contemplation and prayer. That's the lesson of the sixth century.