Some Universals in the Book of Mormon

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A universal element is a salient piece of wisdom or teaching that has a comprehensive spiritual appeal to humanity at large. The golden rule of the Master is an unusually good illustration of this. The examples found in the Book of Mormon are of very high merit.

The Universality of the Book of Mormon

At the outset we note that the title page of the Book of Mormon declares 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." 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,

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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.

Agency and Democracy

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 mankind and of the attempts being made to shackle and regiment mankind 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:

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 Mediator 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. (2 Nephi 2:27)

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 mankind before God. In 1 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. (1 Nephi 17:33–35)

Here is courageously expressed the principle that, everything else being equal, all mankind stands 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 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. (2 Nephi 26:33)

It is my considered belief 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.

The Teaching of Truth

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 and women are of unequal intellectual and spiritual capacity. 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 two-fold; 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 I understand this scripture correctly, 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. I know 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” (Alma 29:8). I have no disposition to oversimplify the problem, but it has always seemed to me 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.

Faith and Validity of Religious Teaching

The thirty-second chapter of Alma contains 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 these religious truths 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)

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)

A feeling of confidence, trust, and respect is aroused in an
individual when he is invited to experiment upon or test the valid-
ity of a religious principle. The Book of Mormon tells us that
another prophet by the name of Amulek, a friend and comrade of
Alma, emulated the example of the latter by exhorting his breth-
ren to “plant the word in your hearts, that ye may try the experi-
ment of its goodness” (Alma 34:4).

The Book of Mormon doctrine of experimentation or of test-
ing 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
mankind 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 that 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 records:

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)
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:

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. A note in his statement rings true to the critical mind. Too many persons in every generation, including our own, hope for things—fantastic things—in the name of faith and religion, but give little thought as to whether or not they are based on truth.

Doctrinal of Opposition

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 figheth 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 is 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. (2 Nephi 2:11, 15–16)

The universal elements in this teaching are 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 me 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, throws light on the purposes leading to man’s existence in mortality. It therefore refers to all mankind without exception. The passage reads:

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

All mankind, whether American, English, Russian, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Hottentot, 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 in God’s presence. As the Nephite prophet further declares:

I have none other object save it be the everlasting welfare of your souls. (2 Nephi 2:30)
Lehi’s words have a nobility that all must admire whether or not they agree with his theology. He reaches out for all people 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.

Service

The second passage of scripture appropriately connects the service which men and women 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)

Few finer sentiments than these can 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.”