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Harden Not Our Hearts: The Opposite of a Hard Heart Is Not Soft

From sacrament meeting to Sunday School, Primary to High Priests, LDS members discuss the heart. The discussion is appropriate since the word “heart” can be found from the first chapter to the last in the Book of Mormon. But do members understand what this word means? For example, in an article by Cynthia Hallen, she discusses some possible definitions of heart. The Hebrew translation, lēbh, pertains to the idea that the heart is the center for emotion, desire, and intelligence (Hallen 107). She also mentions that heart is “a cognate with the word courage” (106). That cognate comes from Latin, leading to the English word record, which comes from the same Latin reflex. The common phrase in scriptures, such as in Abraham 1:31, the “records of the fathers” can then be connected to other phrases, such as the “heart of the fathers” (3 Nephi 25:6). Also, the definition of record is to learn by heart. When the scriptures encourage to record or keep records, it is an encouragement to ponder them again and again (Hallen 107).

In Studying the Scriptures, James Faulconer asserts it is important, when studying the scriptures, to not assume that the meaning is already understood. Faulconer suggests that people may substitute individual thoughts for the teachings of the scriptures. Despite its ubiquitous usage, we cannot assume we understand the meaning of hardened or softened hearts or even the meaning of the word “heart” as used in the scriptures. Yet we do not have to study Hebrew or Greek to gain insight into the meaning of “heart.” A close study of the Book of Mormon reveals that “heart” is more complex than we think it is, and hard hearts are not the opposite of soft hearts.
Of course most LDS members understand “heart” is used symbolically, rather than physically. In the 1828 Webster’s dictionary, defines heart as “secret meaning; real intentions.” The “real intentions” definition fits with the example of heart in 2 Nephi 4:12. Lehi spoke “according to the feelings of his heart.” Lehi spoke of his real intentions when he spoke of the “feelings of his heart.” In an article about the usage of heart, Toril Swan discusses other alternate meanings of heart. She says that the idea of the heart is “the seat of our feelings, the source of our emotional responses to other people, or indeed the seat of our essential self” (Swan 465). She continues to say the heart is the “seat of kindness and mercy… a person’s soul, the essence of the human being” (471). Swan presents the idea that the heart is a container, an object that can be manipulated. The heart can be broken, severed, cracked. It can be light or heavy, soft or hard. Swan presents a concept of heart developed by Susanne Niemeier: the “heart as a metonymy for the person” (466). The idea that the heart could be symbolic for a person complicates the definitions of heart in the scriptures.

According to the Book of Mormon, a heart can be softened. One of the most interesting examples of the softening of hearts is found in Mosiah 23. Alma and his people escaped the priests of King Noah and fled into the wilderness. After eight days, the people of Alma settled the land of Helam. There the people began to prosper, hidden away from the wicked priests of the king. Soon a Lamanite army surrounded the land of Helam. The people “were much frightened because of the appearance of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 23:26). But Alma told them to “remember the Lord their God,” (Mosiah 23:27) and the people prayed that the Lord “would soften the hearts of the Lamanites, that they would spare them, and their wives, and their children” (Mosiah 23:28). And though the Lamanites did put the people of Alma in bondage, their lives were spared because the Lord softened the hearts of the Lamanites.
Throughout the Book of Mormon, there are many examples of softening hearts. In Mosiah 21, when the people of Limhi are in bondage, the Lord “began to soften the hearts of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 21:15). In Alma 24 when the Anti-Nephi-Lehis were converted, they thanked God “that he has given us a portion of his Spirit to soften our hearts” (Alma 24:8). In 1 Nephi 7, “the Lord did soften the heart of Ishmael.” A particularly interesting example occurs in 1 Nephi 18. Nephi and his family are on the boat journeying to the Promised Land when Laman and Lemuel tie Nephi up for days. In verse 19, Sariah, Nephi’s wife, and Nephi’s children attempt to soften Laman and Lemuel’s hearts with tears and prayers. But they “did not soften the hearts of my brethren.” Then in verse 20, “nothing save it were the power of God… could soften their hearts.” Only God could soften Laman and Lemuel’s hearts in 1 Nephi 18. Though there is one example in 1 Nephi 17 where Laman and Lemuel’s hearts are not explicitly softened by God. On the return journey from Jerusalem to gather Ishmael’s family, Laman and Lemuel bound Nephi and attempted to kill him. But in verse 19, a daughter of Ishmael, her mother, and a son of Ishmael plead with Laman and Lemuel and “they did soften their hearts.” The pronouns are unclear as to whether or not God softened the hearts of Laman and Lemuel.

Except for 1 Nephi 7, according to Book of Mormon examples, softening a heart can only be done by the Lord. Interestingly enough, in the Book of Mormon it is always a softened heart, never a soft heart. Typically, in common usage of a softened heart in LDS culture, it is used as the adjective of having a soft heart. For example, in Carole Stephens’s talk, “Wide Awake to our Duties,” she asks, “Is our heart soft?” Though not incorrect, it is not the usage of a softened heart in the Book of Mormon.

Softening, as used in the phrase “softening the heart,” is the opposite of hardening according to both the modern and 1828 dictionary definitions. In the modern Merriam-Webster
dictionary, “soften” is defined as “to make softer; to weaken the military resistance; to impair the
strength of.” In Mosiah 23, the Lamanites have their military resistance weakened, and they
spare the lives of the people of Alma. According to the modern definition of soften, the hearts of
the Lamanites were softened. In the 1828 Webster’s definition of soften, soften means, “to make
less hard; to make less fierce; to make more susceptible to humane or fine feelings.” Laman and
Lemuel, when their hearts are softened in 1 Nephi 18, are made less fierce and more susceptible
to human feelings, and they untie Nephi.

“Hard” is listed as an antonym of soften, and is used regularly in the scriptures.

Hardening a heart is the opposite of softening in both the modern and 1828 definitions. In the
current Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, “harden” is defined as “to make harder; to make callous.”
In Mosiah 23, the hearts of the Lamanites had been callous. Though the hearts of the Lamanites
were not explicitly labeled as hardened hearts, the Lamanites had come to Helam to destroy the
people and conquer the land. It can be interpreted that they had hard hearts that were later
softened by the Lord. In 1828 “harden” meant “to make effrontery; to make unyielding; to
confirm in wickedness.” The 1828 definition fits with Laman and Lemuel in 1 Nephi 18, when
they refused to untie Nephi despite the pleadings of the wives and children.

In Hebrews 3, Paul discusses the wickedness of the Hebrews who “err in their heart; and
they have not known my ways” (Hebrews 3:10). Then in verse 15, Paul tells the Hebrews to
“harden not your hearts.” In accordance to Paul’s words in Hebrews 3, the Bishop of Salisbury in
the early fifteenth century, Robert Neville, discusses in a sermon the meanings of hard heart.
Neville has three categories of hardness: a natural hardness, a voluntary hardness, and a judicial
hardness (3). The natural hardness is similar to the natural man. Though natural hardness is never
mentioned in the Book of Mormon, the natural man is mentioned to be the enemy of God
(Mosiah 3:19). The second type of hardness is voluntary. The voluntary hardness is supported by examples in the Book of Mormon. For example, in Alma 12:10, Alma says, “He that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word.” Alma implies that hardening a heart is a choice by using the word “will.” Neville describes the voluntary hardness as when “men willfully persisted in long continued Habits of many sins” (4). The last type of hardness is the judicial hardness. Neville describes the judicial hardness as a punishment for the voluntary hardness. He continues to quote St. John 12:40, “He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts.” Though Neville describes the implication of voluntary hardness, the scripture in John does imply that God hardened the hearts of the people (5). In the Book of Mormon, the same scripture is quoted almost exactly in 1 Nephi 17:30. The Book of Mormon version says, “they hardened their hearts and blinded their minds” (1 Nephi 17:30). This quotation instead says that the people hardened their hearts, not God. Another example of the people hardening their hearts is in Mosiah 11:29. Abinadi was preaching to the wicked King Noah and his priests, but the priests and king did not listen. Instead, “they hardened their hearts against the words of Abinadi” (Mosiah 11:29). It was voluntary for the priests to harden their hearts. Again in Ether 11:13, “the people hardened their hearts.” The Book of Mormon supports the voluntary heart hardening theory.

Softening and hardening hearts appear to be opposites. After all, “soften” and “harden” are listed as antonyms in both the modern and 1828 dictionaries. But despite the definition similarities, softening the heart does not appear to be voluntary in the Book of Mormon while hardening does. The Lamanites in Mosiah 23 did not choose to soften their hearts or have their hearts softened. Ishmael did not choose to have his heart softened. Laman and Lemuel did not choose to soften their hearts. But hardening a heart appears to be a choice. King Noah chose to
harden his heart. Zeezrom chose to harden his heart. The people in 1 Nephi 17:30 voluntarily hardened their hearts. Hardening and softening a heart do not appear to be opposites in the Book of Mormon because hardening is voluntarily while softening typically is not.

Supporting the idea that hardening and softening are not opposites in the Book of Mormon is that soften and harden are never used together. In Mosiah 23, the softening of the hearts of the Lamanites is mentioned, but never is the hardness of their hearts explicitly mentioned. When the people of Limhi are in bondage, the hardness of the hearts is never mentioned. When King Noah hardened his heart against Abinadi, the softening of the heart is not mentioned. When the Jaredites hardened their hearts in Ether, there is no mention of softening hearts. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon are soften and harden used together in the same chapter. And if they are never used together, they are not juxtaposed as opposites.

In addition to separate usage, another indication that harden and soften are not opposites in the Book of Mormon is that they are primarily used in different genres. Each example of “softening a heart” is found in a narrative genre. In Mosiah 23, the softening of hearts is used in the midst of the story of the capture of the land of Helam by the Lamanites and the story of Alma and his people. On the other hand, hardening a heart can be in a rhetorical sermon. In Alma 12, Alma is preaching to Zeezrom and attempting to call Ammonihah to repentance. So while softening hearts is always used in a narrative setting, hardening is used in a rhetorical sermon. Additionally, harden is used in the Bible while soften is not. Never once is soften mentioned in the Bible, while harden is. So because harden is used in sermons and soften is used in narrative, which are different genres, they are not contrasted as opposites.

Another support for the idea that hardening and softening cannot be opposites is that harden is used in the command form and soften is descriptive. Hardening hearts is often used in
imperative voice as a warning. For example, in Alma 12, when Alma says that those who harden their hearts will receive the lesser portion of the word, it is a warning. Alma is warning the people of Ammonihah of the consequences of their hard hearts. But never does Alma command the people of Ammonihah to soften their hearts. Softening hearts is never a command. Whether the hardness of King Noah’s heart or the hardness of the hearts of the Jaredites is mentioned, no one is ever commanded to soften their hearts. When softening hearts is used, it is in a narrative and used as a description. Softening is not used in sermons or commands. It seems that soften and harden cannot be opposites if harden is used as a command and a warning and soften is only description within a narrative.

Harden and soften, though opposites in definition, are not supported as opposites in the Book of Mormon. They are not used together and are used in different genres and grammatical forms. Harden is a choice while soften is not. Interestingly in Alma 12, not hardening is also a choice. In Alma 12:36, Alma says “Let us repent, and harden not our hearts,” implying that not hardening a heart is voluntary.

For many action verbs, the best binary option is the negation of that same action. The opposite of “walking” is “not walking.” The antithesis of “dancing” is not “standing,” “running,” or “jumping.” The best binary option is “not dancing.” So with “hardening,” the opposite would be “not hardening.” Not hardening one’s heart appears to be the opposite of hardening one’s heart and is supported by the idea that they are used together, in antithetical parallelism, in the Bible, and in the same genre and form.

The first implication that harden and not harden are opposites is that they are contrasted in the same chapters. In 1 Nephi 14, during Nephi’s vision, the Lord says, “Harden not their hearts against the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:2). Then later in the chapter, the Lord says, “Wo be
unto the Gentiles if it be that they harden their hearts against the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:6).

The Lord mentions harden not and harden within the same chapter, juxtaposed with one another. Another example is in 1 Nephi 15. Nephi is preaching to his brethren to call them to repentance. Nephi says, “How is that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts?” (1 Nephi 15:10). Then in the next verse Nephi says, “If ye will not harden your hearts....” (1 Nephi 15:11). Again harden and not harden are used to contrast against each other. As already noted in Alma 12, Alma says “If ye will harden your hearts ye shall not enter into the rest of the Lord.” And in the very next verse, Alma says, “Let us repent, and harden not our hearts” (Alma 12:37). Also in Alma 12, Alma mentions the hardening of hearts six times. He also mentions hardening not their hearts three times. For example, in verse 33, Alma says, “harden not your hearts,” and in verse 35 he says, “whosoever will harden his heart.” Hardening and not hardening appear to be binary pairs or opposites in the scriptures, supported by the fact they are used together.

Harden and not harden are used together in the Bible as well. While soften is not used in the Bible, not harden is used six times. While there is no soften to compare to in the Bible, harden and not harden are still used together. In the Bible, while harden is used in both sermon and narrative contexts, it is primarily used in sermons. Each of the instances of not harden occur in sermon context as well. Additionally, harden not is a command in the Bible as it was in the Book of Mormon. For example, in Hebrews 3:8, Paul is writing his epistle to the Hebrews. He commands the Hebrews to “harden not your hearts.” Then in verse 10, Paul says that the Hebrews “err in their heart,” and in verse 12 he talks about “an evil heart of unbelief.” The errors and evils in the heart imply the hardened hearts of the Hebrews. Paul contrasts the hard state of the hearts with the command to “harden not your hearts,” (Hebrews 3:8) similar to the usage in the Book of Mormon.
Another support that harden and not harden are opposites is they are used in antithetical parallelism. Donald W. Parry describes parallelism in scriptures as “a line, a phrase, or a sentence and then restates it, so that the second line, phrase, or sentence echoes or mirrors the first” (xiii). He expands on parallelism, dividing into different categories. Specifically, there is antithetical parallelism or opposites. Antithetical parallelism is the “opposition of words, expressions, or ideas, or an antithesis between two lines” (xxxi). Parry continues to say that the Book of Mormon contains parallelisms with “rich and varied antonyms” (xxxii). The antithetical parallelism in the Book of Mormon supports harden and not harden as opposites. For example, in Alma 12 when Alma the Younger is preaching to Zeezrom, he uses hard and not hard as opposing pairs. In Alma 12:10 when Alma says, “he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word,” he goes on to use parallelism to explain the opposite situation. Alma says, “he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word.” The two phrases are almost exactly the same in structure. They both begin with “he that will” and then explain the state of that heart: a heart that is hard versus a heart that is not. Then Alma explains the consequences associated with each type of heart. For those with a hardened heart, they receive a lesser portion while those with the not hardened heart receive the greater portion. Harden and not harden are presented in antithetical parallelism supporting the idea they appear as opposites.

Another example of antithetical parallelism is found in 1 Nephi 15. Initially in verse 4, Nephi says that he “was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts.” Nephi explains the current state of the hearts of his brethren. Then Nephi begins to preach to his brethren about “inquiring of the Lord” (1 Nephi 15:8). Laman and Lemuel tell Nephi that the Lord has made “no such things known unto us” (1 Nephi 15:9). Then Nephi tells his brethren that they “will
perish, because of the hardness of their hearts” (1 Nephi 15:10). But Nephi then reminds his brethren of the words of the Lord and says, “if ye will not harden your hearts… surely these things shall be made known unto you” (1 Nephi 15:11). Nephi tells his brethren to “not harden” their hearts as possibly the solution to their hard hearts.

The antithetical parallelism of harden and not harden can even be found in the Bible. For example, in the JST of Hebrews 4:3, Paul uses harden and not harden as opposites. Paul quotes the Lord saying, “If they harden their hearts they shall not enter into my rest.” But immediately after continues, “If they will not harden their hearts, they shall enter into my rest.” Each of these two phrases begins with an action and results in a consequence. And for each action, the consequence is the exact opposite. They enter into His rest or they do not enter into His rest, those are the results. The only two actions given are hardening their hearts and not hardening their hearts. Since the consequences are opposites, these paralleled actions appear to be opposites in the Bible.

The final implication that hardening and not hardening could be opposites is they are often used in the same genre. Richard D. Rust says that the prophecy in the Book of Mormon was “planned with a purpose but shaped artistically so that form and content are totally integrated” (“The Book of Mormon, Designed for Our Day”). Rust implies that the prophecies are organized into genres with a purpose. Hardening and not hardening are very often used within the same genre or form. Hardening can be used in sermons, and not hardening is always used in a sermon. For example, in Alma 12, Alma is preaching in a sermon. He mentions hardening and the consequences and then goes on to illustrate the consequences of not hardening. While those that harden their hearts “receiveth the lesser portion of the word,” those that “will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word” (Alma 12:10). Not
hardening is used in a sermon alongside hardening. And while hardening can be a warning, not hardening is a command. For example, in Alma 34, Amulek, preaching to the Zoramites, says, “I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer….” (Alma 34:31). Amulek commands the people to not harden their hearts anymore. Again in Jacob’s sermon in Jacob 6, he says, “If ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Jacob 6:6). Not hardening the heart is used as a command associated with the warning against a hardened heart. Both harden and not harden are used in the sermon genre, supporting the idea that they are used as opposites.

Harden and not harden appear to be opposites in the Book of Mormon as they are used within antithetical parallelism and the same form and genre. Softened hearts do not seem to be the opposite of hardened hearts. Despite the wide and free usage of descriptions of hard and soft hearts, it is possible that most people do not understand the relationship of these terms. Softening the heart appears to be only accomplished by God while not hardening or hardening is accomplished by man. The only aspect we have control over is whether or not we harden our hearts. In the very last usage of the word heart, the pattern of softening and then choosing to harden or not is present. In Moroni 10:3, Moroni says about reading the Book of Mormon, “if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men… that ye shall receive these things.” Moroni implies that it is not a voluntary choice to have the Book of Mormon presented to us. He has been merciful to allow each individual to read the words. Then Moroni continues to say, “ponder it in your hearts” (Moroni 10:3). It is voluntary to ponder the words in the heart, just as it is voluntary to harden or harden not a heart. Following the opportunity to read, there comes the choice to harden our hearts or to choose to not harden our hearts. It is the only aspect of the process we can have
control over. We can choose to harden our hearts. Or, like Moroni pleads with us to do, we can
“ask with a sincere heart, with real intent” and harden not our hearts (Moroni 10:4).
Works Cited


