

King Benjamin, Aristotle, and Nineteenth-Century Conceptions of the Heart

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“And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.” -Mosiah 5:2

My Sunday school class of eleven-year-olds sat with blank faces when I asked, after reading Mosiah 5:2, “What does it mean to have a mighty change in our heart?” The room’s silence persisted as seconds stretched into minutes. Finally, one student hazarded, “It means that we change who we are.” Everyone else nodded in agreement but offered no further ideas. My students’ struggle to articulate what King Benjamin’s people meant by “a mighty change in . . . heart” led me to question my own understanding of the phrase, one which we often hear in weekly church talks and general conference.¹ What is our “heart”? And what does it mean to change it?

As a scholar of language and literature, I sometimes wish that I could turn to an authoritative Nephite lexicon or the pocket edition of the *Oxford Reformed Egyptian-English Dictionary* when I have questions about words or phrases in the Book of Mormon. Of course, as a book self-consciously written to future generations, to “all ye ends of the earth” as “the voice of one crying from the dust” (2 Nephi 33:13), the Book of Mormon is meant to transcend temporal limitations. Modern dictionaries therefore provide a number of meaningful ways to interpret the text. Nonetheless, I often look to the English vernacular of Joseph Smith’s time—the immediate language of the text’s translation—to find further insights about gospel terminology. Consequently, after the discussion with my eleven-year-old Sunday school class, I wondered, what might “heart” and “change” have meant to early church leaders and members? And how do these meanings parallel, expand, or refine the definitions found in my own twenty-first-century context?

¹ For general conference talks and BYU devotional addresses on a change of heart, see Bonnie L. Oscarson, “Be Ye Converted,” *Ensign*, November 2013; Dale G. Renlund, “Preserving the Heart’s Mighty Change,” *Ensign*, November 2009; David A. Bednar, “Ye Must Be Born Again,” *Ensign*, May 2007, and “Clean Hands and a Pure Heart,” *Ensign*, November 2007; Brent W. Webb, “Repentance: A Might Change of Heart,” *BYU Devotional*, May 1999; and Spencer J. Condie, “A Mighty Change of Heart,” *Ensign*, November 1993.

Ultimately, nineteenth-century conceptions of the “heart” and “change” have lead me to a more capacious understanding of the type of change King Benjamin’s people identified happening within themselves as a result of their conversion. In this article, I will use Noah Webster’s 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (published two years prior to the Book of Mormon’s original edition) as a lens for considering how a nineteenth-century audience would likely have understood the concepts of “heart” and “change.” By looking through this lens, we can see how the “heart” for early readers of the Book of Mormon refers not only to a person’s nature and disposition but more specifically to what we might think of as psycho-cognitive faculties: emotion, understanding, conscience, mind, and will. Additionally, Webster’s dictionary discusses “change” in Aristotelian terms of “coming-to-be,” an idea that Webster borrows from the famous writer, biographer, and lexicographer Samuel Johnson in his *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1785). Reading Mosiah 5:2 in these terms, we can see how the experience of a changed heart is an intense, immersive process of coming-to-be that transforms unholy hearts into holy ones.

The Nineteenth-Century Heart

The nineteenth-century understanding of the heart in America was shaped by seventeenth-century English theology. In general, early modern English theologians considered the heart as the central locus of the soul’s faculties or abilities. For example, in his *A Christian Dictionary* (1612), the Church of England clergyman Thomas Wilson equates the heart with the “soule,” specifically its “faculties of understanding; Reason, Judgement, Will . . . and affections.”² What Wilson and other early modern theologians describe as the heart’s spiritual faculties resonate with Noah Webster’s 1828 definition of the heart. However, instead of depicting the heart in terms of the soul’s abilities, Webster portrays the heart in terms of the mind’s psycho-cognitive faculties.³

First, Webster depicts the heart as “the seat [or source] of affections and passions, as of love, joy, grief, enmity, courage, pleasure, etc.”⁴ What he describes as affections and passions, we in the twenty-first century would call emotions. Consequently, an early reader of the Book of Mormon would likely have read a change of heart as a change in a person’s emotional state: a movement from ungodly emotions—enmity and envy—to their godly counterparts—love, joy, and peace. Moreover, the Book of Mosiah associates an emotive change with conversion. King Benjamin states that before repentance a person feels “guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire” (2:38). However, as a result of God’s forgiveness, a person’s emotions are transformed: she “rejoice[s]” as she is “filled with love towards God and all men” (2:4).

Second, Webster asserts that the heart is “the seat of the understanding.”⁵ For him, understanding means “the faculty of the human mind by which it apprehends the real state of things presented to it, or by which it receives or comprehends the ideas which others express and intend

² Thomas Wilson, *A Christian Dictionarie* (London, 1612), 218.

³ In defining the heart, Webster does not once refer to the soul. Although early Americans believed in the connection between the soul and psycho-cognitive abilities, they separate the soul from the mind and affect more than their early modern counterparts.

⁴ Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “heart, noun (4).”

⁵ Webster, s.v. “heart, noun (6).”

to communicate.”⁶ In other words, understanding is inextricably tied to perception, the ability to correctly view the “real state of things” and properly “comprehend” information or ideas from another person. Again, Webster’s definition highlights another type of change that King Benjamin’s people undergo. Before their repentance, the Nephites resemble the Children of Israel who “hardened their hearts, and *understood* not that the law of Moses availeth nothing except it were through the atonement of his [Christ’s] blood” (Mosiah 3:15; emphasis added). After repenting, the Nephites come to a “lively sense of . . . [their] own guilt” and “are consigned to an awful *view* of their own guilt and abominations” as they “*viewed* themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 2:38, 3:25, 4:2; emphases added). As a result of their changed hearts, the Nephites obtained a new ability to perceive and to apprehend the “real state” of their souls and their relationship with God—what the Prophet Jacob calls “things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13). This perceptive ability coincides with a newfound understanding to communicate: their ears are “open[ed]” that they “may hear, and . . . [their] hearts that . . . [they] may *understand*” (Mosiah 2:9; emphasis added).

Third, Webster defines the heart as the “conscience, or sense of good or ill.”⁷ This faculty coincides with the previous two. As we saw above, King Benjamin’s people are weighed down with guilt. But “having received a remission of their sins,” the Nephites receive a “peace of *conscience*,” a spiritual state that mirrors King Benjamin’s, which allows him to “walk . . . with a clear *conscience* before God” (Mosiah 4:3; 2:27; emphasis added). An early reader of the Book of Mormon would likely have read a change of heart as a clearing of the conscience, a calming of guilty feelings that originate from understanding the true extent of the Atonement and its redemptive power.

Fourth, Webster posits that the heart constitutes the “disposition of mind.”⁸ By “disposition,” he means the “inclination; propensity; the temper or frame of mind.”⁹ Nineteenth-century readers then would likely have considered conversion as a transformation of the mind’s inclination or propensity toward doing good or evil. King Benjamin highlights such a change when he tells his people that after conversion “ye will not have a *mind* to injure one another, but to live peaceably” (Mosiah 4:13; emphasis added).

Finally, Webster suggests that the heart is “the seat of the will”: “that faculty of the mind by which we determine either to do or forbear an action; the faculty which is exercised in deciding, among two or more objects, which we shall embrace or pursue.”¹⁰ For a nineteenth-century reader, the Nephite’s change of the heart would likely have represented an increased ability to *choose*: “to do or forbear an action.” Significantly, King Benjamin juxtaposes those who “listeth to obey the evil spirit” with those who are “*willing* to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him” and “*willing* to enter into a covenant with . . . God to do his *will*” (Mosiah 2:37, 3:19, 5:5; emphasis added). A change of heart, then, transforms not only the Nephites’ inclinations to “embrace or pursue” Christ but more importantly their will and capacity to do so.

⁶ Webster, s.v. “understanding, noun (1).”

⁷ Webster, s.v. “heart, noun (13).”

⁸ Webster, s.v. “heart, noun (11).”

⁹ Webster, s.v. “disposition, noun (5).”

¹⁰ Webster, s.v. “heart, noun (7)” and “will, noun (1).”

Samuel Johnson, Aristotle, and Change

What I have talked about above addresses the beginning and end points of the conversion process: the condition of the heart before and after Christ sanctifies it with his grace. The idea of “change,” however, relates to all that happens in between. Webster defines change in several ways, including “a succession of one thing in the place of another.”¹¹ Significantly, Webster lifted this definition word for word from Samuel Johnson’s monumental *A Dictionary of the English Language*. In fact, Webster heavily borrowed from Johnson’s dictionary to compose the entirety of his own.¹² Hence, it is from Johnson that Webster adopts an Aristotelian understanding of change. As with many writers of his age, Johnson’s understanding of nature, generally, and change, specifically, was inflected by Aristotle’s *Physics*, where the philosopher defines change, in part, as “com[ing] to be” (γένεσις/genesis).¹³ Consequently, this Aristotelian concept helps us see how early readers of the Book of Mormon might have read the Nephites’ conversion in Mosiah 5:2 as a process of generation: a wicked heart dying and a new, holy heart rising in its place.

In *Physics*, Aristotle describes coming-to-be as “something which becomes that.”¹⁴ In other words, he envisions coming-to-be as one thing becoming another thing entirely, a change from *this* to *that*. This type of change necessitates the complete transformation of an object’s essence or substance. Aristotle gives a helpful example of what he means by this in another treatise, *On Generation and Corruption*. He indicates that after human copulation the parent’s combined “seed” or zygote comes to be something completely different by turning into blood.¹⁵ The form and matter of the zygote (its material makeup) substantively changes into the form and matter of blood, which later becomes the fetus. Hence, this type of change entails both a “coming-to-be” and a “passing-away”—the seed must pass away so that blood comes to be. Aristotle’s conception of “coming-to-be” therefore works off a principle of replacement: in order for “coming-to-be” to occur, an object’s old essence or substance needs to be replaced with a new one.

The hearts of King Benjamin’s people undergo a similar type of change. His people’s wicked emotions pass away and are replaced by new ones: love, peace, and joy. These god-like feelings are substantively different than their carnal counterparts. Additionally, the Nephite’s understandings, consciences, minds, and wills undergo a coming-to-be and passing-away. The incorrect understanding of their spiritual state is substituted with a correct vision of their spiritual

¹¹ Webster, s.v. “change, noun (2).”

¹² Joseph W. Reed, Jr., “Noah Webster’s Debt to Samuel Johnson,” *American Speech* 37, no. 2 (1962): 95–105.

¹³ Aristotle, “Physics,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 190b5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 325. On Aristotle’s influence on Johnson and his contemporaries, see Scott D. Evans, *Samuel Johnson’s “General Nature”: Tradition and Transition in Eighteenth-Century Discourse* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 11–14, 21–35.

¹⁴ Aristotle, “Physics,” 190b12–13.

¹⁵ Aristotle, “On Generation and Corruption,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 319b15–16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 522.

depravity. Their guilty consciences are replaced by consciences ruled by peace, their mind's inclination toward evil is replaced by a propensity toward good, and their faulty ability to do good works is replaced by a will empowered to choose righteousness. In other words, early readers of the Book of Mormon would have considered the Nephites' change in heart in a way that resembles Paul's description of conversion when he tells the people of Ephesus to "put off . . . the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" and "put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:22, 24). In line with Aristotle's understanding of change as "coming-to-be," the change in heart outlined in Mosiah 5:2 represents a substantive change, a complete renovation of a person as her old heart is mortified and replaced with a new one in Christ.

Conclusion

Webster's definitions of "heart" and Aristotle's concept of "change" give us not only a better understanding of how Joseph Smith and his peers might have read Mosiah 5:2 but also a more comprehensive way of reading King Benjamin's speech. Of course, King Benjamin is concerned about the transformation of human nature and behavior. But he is also concerned about emotional, ethical, epistemological, intellectual, and agential issues. As much as the Atonement remedies sin and sinful behavior, it also augments and elevates the way we feel, cogitate, understand, discern, and choose. To be sure, for King Benjamin repentance is a matter of the soul. But it is also a matter of the heart. The changes that come in true conversion induce a broad, immersive metamorphosis of our emotions, consciences, understandings, minds, and wills.

In the end, this reading of Mosiah helps us understand how repentance and conversion can stimulate a change in our own hearts. The underlying premise of Mosiah 5:2 is that the Atonement of Jesus Christ does more than inspire a simple change. It galvanizes a *mighty* change. It makes our old sinful selves pass away and allows our true, righteous selves to come into being. Moreover, the Atonement alters our hearts beyond our own human capacities. It enables us to feel god-like emotions, to regulate our consciences, to view the world and ourselves with an eternal perspective, to better exercise our intellectual faculties, and, ultimately, to choose right over wrong in ways superior to when we are left to our own devices. In effect, nineteenth-century understandings of the heart and Aristotelian change teach us a lesson about how God changes hearts: he makes unholy hearts pass away and new, holy ones come into being.

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