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## **“Most Desirable Above All Things”: Onomastic Play on Mary and Mormon in the Book of Mormon**

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# “MOST DESIRABLE ABOVE ALL THINGS”: ONOMASTIC PLAY ON MARY AND MORMON IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Matthew L. Bowen

*Abstract: The names Mary and Mormon most plausibly derive from the Egyptian word mr(i), “love, desire, [or] wish.” Mary denotes “beloved [i.e., of deity]” and is thus conceptually connected with divine love, while Mormon evidently denotes “desire/love is enduring.” The text of the Book of Mormon manifests authorial awareness of the meanings of both names, playing on them in multiple instances. Upon seeing Mary (“the mother of God,” 1 Nephi 11:18, critical text) bearing the infant Messiah in her arms in vision, Nephi, who already knew that God “loveth his children,” came to understand that the meaning of the fruit-bearing tree of life “is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore it is the most desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:17-25). Later, Alma the Elder and his people entered into a covenant and form a church based on “love” and “good desires” (Mosiah 18:21, 28), a covenant directly tied to the waters of Mormon: Behold here are the waters of Mormon ... and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God ... if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized ...?; “they clapped their hands for joy and exclaimed: This is the desire of our hearts” (Mosiah 18:8-11). Alma the Younger later recalled the “song of redeeming love” that his father and others had sung at the waters of Mormon (Alma 5:3-9, 26; see Mosiah 18:30). Our editor, Mormon, who was himself named after the land of Mormon and its waters*

(3 Nephi 5:12), repeatedly spoke of charity as “everlasting love” or the “pure love of Christ [that] endureth forever” (Moroni 7:47-48; 8:16-17; 26). All of this has implications for Latter-day Saints or “Mormons” who, as children of the covenant, must endure to the end in Christlike “love” as Mormon and Moroni did, particularly in days of diminishing faith, faithfulness, and love (see, e.g., Mormon 3:12; contrast Moroni 9:5).

When Nephi was granted his “desire” and “saw the things which [his] father saw,”<sup>1</sup> he immediately “beheld a tree ... like unto the tree which [his] father had seen” (1 Nephi 11:8). Nephi’s second “desire” (11:10) was expressly “to know the interpretation thereof” (11:11), whereupon he saw Mary bearing the Christ child in her arms (11:20). Nephi’s angelic guide then asked him: “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” (11:21), to which Nephi responded, “Yea, it is the **love of God** which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the **most desirable** above all things” (11:22; emphasis in all scriptural citations hereafter is mine). As Daniel C. Peterson has noted, “it was only when she [Mary] appeared with a baby and was identified as ‘the mother ... of God’ that Nephi grasped the tree’s meaning.”<sup>2</sup> At that point, Nephi understood that the “love of God” that was “most desirable above all things” had its fullest expression in Christ’s incarnation through Mary whose name evidently derives from the Egyptian root *mr(i)* “love,” “desire,” “wish.”

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1 See 1 Nephi 11:1-7 and 14:29, which form a literary *inclusio* or envelope figure around Nephi’s account of his own vision of his father’s tree of life dream.

2 Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and his Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 18. It should be worth noting here that Peterson saw the tree equating to Mary (Asherah = Love of God) and the “fruit of Mary’s womb, Jesus,” equating to the fruit of the Tree (Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8-23” in *Mormons, Scripture and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* ed. David Bitton [Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Provo, UT: 1998], 194).

Hundreds of years later, in texts preserved for us by Moroni, Mormon repeatedly describes “charity” or divine “love” as being “everlasting” or “endur[ing]” (Moroni 7:47-48; 8:16-17, 26)<sup>3</sup> In this paper I will suggest that the relationship of these passages is more than just thematic (i.e., they speak of divine “love”), but also onomastic and philological. I will further propose that both passages use wordplay or play on meaning involving the names’ shared Egyptian term *mr(i)* or *mry*, which as a noun (*mry*[.t]) means “love” or “desire” and as a verb means to “love,” “desire,” or “wish.” Nephi’s words, recorded decades after his initial vision, play on the name “Mary” (“beloved [of deity], ‘the love of the deity’”) and Mormon’s words play on his own name (“love [that] endures,” see below).

Additionally, I will explore the naming of “the waters of Mormon” (Mosiah 18), whence Mormon tells us his name derives (3 Nephi 5:12). I will further explore the meaning of the name “Mormon” and suggest that “Mormon,” originally bestowed by King Noah upon the land, forest, and waters of Mormon, was later “re-motivated”<sup>4</sup> — that is, given new meaning by Alma and his followers in light of the covenant made there. Wordplay on the name “Mormon” in terms of “desire” and “love” — the range of meaning for Egyptian *mr(i)* — is evident in Alma the Elder’s baptismal speech (Mosiah 18:8-11) and Mormon’s description of that community’s covenant “love” (18:21) and “good desires toward God” (18:28).

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3 Paul Hoskisson (“What’s in a Name? Mormon — Part 2,” *Insights* 32/3 [2012]: 2) notes a possible connection between “Mormon” and Moroni 7:47. I will here offer additional textual evidence that strengthens the plausibility of this suggestion (e.g., in Moroni 7:48; 8:16-17, 26 and elsewhere).

4 On the idea of onomastic “remotivation,” see Stéphane Gendron, “L’étymologie populaire: Quels enjeux pour l’onomastique?” in *Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, Aberdeen, August 4-11, 1996* (2 vols.; ed. W.F.H. Nicolaisen; Aberdeen: Dept. of English, University of Aberdeen, 1998), 1:130-33. See also John M. Anderson, *The Grammar of Names* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85.

## A Methodological Note

The two languages that Nephi indicates he knew were Hebrew and Egyptian (1 Nephi 1:2).<sup>5</sup> For the nearly 1,000 years these remained the spoken<sup>6</sup> and literary<sup>7</sup> languages of the Nephites (see especially Mormon 9:32-33).<sup>8</sup> While Moroni's explanation

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5 Nephi would have grown up as a native Hebrew-speaker in and near Jerusalem. He acquired his knowledge of Egyptian language/writing from his father. 1 Nephi 1:2: "Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians." Nephi's own name is evidently Egyptian. See John Gee, "A Note on the Name Nephi," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189-91; and idem "Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 1-5.

6 Compare Omni 1:17: "And at the time that Mosiah discovered them, they had become exceedingly numerous. Nevertheless, they had had many wars and serious contentions, and had fallen by the sword from time to time; and **their language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them;** and they denied the being of their Creator; and Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them." This passage suggests that the Nephites' spoken language was essentially Hebrew, just as the Mulekites' spoken language had originally been. Change to the Nephites' spoken language came more conservatively because they had brought records with them and continued to keep written records. The language of the Mulekites became "corrupted" more quickly precisely because "they had brought no records with them."

7 Compare Mosiah 1:2-4: "And it came to pass that he had three sons; and he called their names Mosiah, and Helorum, and Helaman. And he caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord. And he also taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, saying: My sons, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, not knowing the mysteries of God. For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to this present time."

8 Mormon 9:32-33: "And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the

that the Nephites had “altered” their writing systems “according to [their] manner of speech” (9:32) certainly suggests the presence of expected diachronic phenomena (e.g., changes in pronunciation, creolization with other languages) that occur in language.

While we cannot know the precise contents of plates from which the Book of Mormon has been translated, we can use our knowledge of the languages that the Nephites said they used to posit reasonable suppositions about what they contain. Biblical scholars engage in this type of activity (i.e., textual criticism) when they analyze the ancient non-Hebrew witnesses to the text (e.g., the Greek Septuagint [LXX], the Syriac Peshitta, the Old Latin, etc.). Using a knowledge of these other biblical languages can help us arrive at what the Hebrew *Vorlagen*<sup>9</sup> of these texts may have looked like (vis-à-vis the Hebrew Masoretic Text) pending further evidence.

Whether the language on Nephi’s small plates was Egyptian, Hebrew written in Egyptian script, or a stylized form of Egyptian scribal shorthand, I begin here from the presupposition that Nephi (whose own name was Egyptian<sup>10</sup> and who had been taught Egyptian, 1 Nephi 1:2) knew enough Egyptian for lexical associations to be made on Egyptian names and words as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> In any case, onomastic wordplay can be detected through multiple layers of language. For example, a reader reading in English can detect the wordplay evident in the angel’s words to Joseph recorded in

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reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech. And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record.”

9 The German term *Vorlage* literally denotes “a forward position.” In text critical terms, a *Vorlage* is the earlier copy of a text from which another copy or a translation is made.

10 Gee, “A Note on the Name Nephi,” 189-91.

11 Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2; idem, “An Additional Note on the Meaning of the Name Nephi,” *Insights*, 23/6 (2003): 2-3; idem, “What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?,” *Insights* 25/5 (2005): 2-3.

Matthew 1:21: “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name **JESUS** [Gk. *Iesoun* < *Iesous* < Heb. *Yēšûaʿ*]: for he shall **save** [Gk. *sōsei* < Heb. *yōsîaʿ*]<sup>12</sup> his people from their sins.” Although the translated text is in English and the underlying text is Greek, Hebrew wordplay on *Yēšûaʿ* and the verb *yāšaʿ* (to “save”) can be detected even beneath or behind the Greek.

Another relevant example can be detected in the onomastic wordplay found in Genesis 9–10 (see especially 9:20-27) on the names Ham, Canaan, and the Hebrew word *ʿebed* (“slave”) and Egyptian *ḥm* (slave, majesty). Gary A. Rendsburg observes the following:

The word *ḥām* corresponds to the Egyptian word *ḥm*, “majesty,” used commonly in the expression *ḥm-f* “His Majesty,” used to refer to the Pharaoh. But the same biconsonantal noun *ḥm* also means “slave” in Egyptian, and this supplies one of the clues for understanding Gen 9:20-27. Ham saw his father Noah in a naked state, the punishment for which is that his son Canaan will be a slave — note the fourfold use of the word Egyptian word *ʿebed* ... in vv. 25-27 — to his brothers Shem and Japhet. The next no doubt [implicitly] puns on the root *k-n-* “be low, be humbled, be humbled” in the word *Kēnaʿan*.<sup>13</sup>

Rendsburg further suggests that “the author of the story had the Egyptian meaning of *ḥm* ‘slave’ in mind, and that he in turn assumed that his intellectual readership would understand the bilingual word play.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, one need not be reading from an Egyptian text to detect an Egyptian pun embedded in a Hebrew (or vice versa) or even to detect the plausible presence

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12 The wordplay on “Jesus” (Gk. *Iesoun* < *Iesous*) and “shall save” (Gk. *sōsei*) actually works in Greek as a paronomasia on *Iesous* and *sōsei*, in addition to its originally Hebrew/Semitic character (*Yēšûaʿ*/\**yōsîaʿ*).

13 G.A. Rendsburg, “Word Play in Biblical Hebrew: An Eclectic Collection,” in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Scott B. Noegel; Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000), 143-46.

14 *Ibid.*



of such wordplay beneath an English translation. Thus, we can detect plausible Egyptianistic and Hebraistic wordplay in the translated English of the Book of Mormon (e.g., Hebraisms can exist in an Egyptian text and vice versa), even though we do not have the original plate text in front of us. Ultimately, it should be noted, the reader will be the final arbiter as to the plausibility of any such potential wordplay pending further confirming or negating evidence.

### “The Love of God”: “Mary” as an Egyptian Name

The name “Mary” (from “Miriam”; New Testament “Mariam” or “Maria”)<sup>15</sup> still makes best sense as an Egyptian theophoric<sup>16</sup> hypocoristicon,<sup>17</sup> deriving from the Egyptian root *mr(i)* or *mry* which as a verb means to “love, . . . want, wish, desire”<sup>18</sup> and as a noun (*mr[.wt]*) means “love, . . . will, desire,”<sup>19</sup> rather than as a derivation from Mara, “bitter”<sup>20</sup> from Ruth 1:20.<sup>21</sup> “Mary” or “Miriam” in Egyptian, like David in Hebrew, means “Beloved,”

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15 The New Testament Greek forms of “Mary,” “Mariam” and “Maria,” are aramaized forms of the biblical name Miriam. The biblical figure grew up in Egypt. Miriam [*mrym*] or Mariam (Hebrew/Aramaic) > Maria(m) (Greek, Latin) > Marie (French) > Mary.

16 Theophoric names are names which “bear,” i.e., include the name of deity in some way. This definition should probably be understood to include names in which the deity is grammatically present (e.g., in verb forms or in cognomena).

17 A hypocoristicon is an originally longer name that has been shortened. . . . Some examples of theophoric hypocoristica in Hebrew are “Joseph” (“May he [God] add”) and “Nathan” (“He [God] has given”). The divine name elements are formally missing but implied.

18 See, e.g., Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 111. Hereafter cited as CDME.

19 CDME, 111.

20 One may be tempted to see a conceptual play on “Mary” and “bitter” in the apocryphal story of Mary’s being subject to the Mosaic “bitter water ordeal” or Sotah (Numbers 5:11-31) in chapter 16 of the Protoevangelium of James. However there is nothing in the text *per se* that suggests that the author is making an onomastic connection between “Mary” and “bitter.”

21 Naomi’s words in Ruth 1:20 present the name “Mara” (“bitter”) as a diametric antonym to “Naomi” (“sweet,” “pleasant”): “And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with

i.e., “beloved of the god.” James K. Hoffmeier writes: “Although there are many linguistic explanations for the final *mem* [m in Miriam/Mariam], there is agreement that *mary* is the proposed writing of the root *mry*, meaning ‘love’ or ‘beloved.’”<sup>22</sup>

Egyptian names and epithets employing forms of the verbal root *mr(i)* or *mry* are widely attested.<sup>23</sup> For example, the name *mry-k3-r'* (Merikare), which belonged to a king of the 10<sup>th</sup> dynasty, denotes “the Beloved of the Sun’s essence”; the name of the 19th dynasty Pharaoh was *mr-n-ptḥ* (Merneptah), “Beloved of Ptah”; *mry.t 'itn* (Meritaten) denotes “Beloved of Aten (i.e., the divinized sundisk)”; *mry-r'* (Meryre or Merire), “Beloved of Re” was a name borne by at least two Egyptian nobles. Moreover, *mr(y)/mry(.t)* was an important element in epithets and royal epithets. *Mry-nṯr* referred to the “Beloved of the god”; *mry(.t)-r'* was an epithet of Isis; *mr(y) 'imn* as a royal epithet denoted “Beloved of Amun”; and *mry 3st* denoted “Beloved of Isis.” Many other such examples could be cited.

That some form of the name “Mary” was definitively known to the Nephites as the name of the mother of the Redeemer is clear from at least two passages. King Benjamin declared that an angel had revealed to him the following details about the birth of the Redeemer: “And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called **Mary**” (Mosiah 3:8). Similarly, Alma declares to the church members in the city of Gideon: “And behold, **he shall be born of Mary**, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she

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me.” It is not clear from a linguistic standpoint how Mara would have become Miriam/Mariam/Mary.

22 James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 225.

23 *Mry* (“beloved”) was used in wide array of names and titles. A common title was *mry-nṯr* (“beloved of god”), i.e., the “love of God.” For a list of *mr(i)*-epithets see, e.g., Denise M. Doxey, *Egyptian Non-royal Epithets in the Middle Kingdom: A Social and Historical Analysis* (Probleme der Aegyptologie 12; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 304-312. Cf. also the title *hm.t mry.t-nṯr* (“the spouse, beloved of god”).

being a virgin, a **precious and chosen vessel**, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God” (Alma 7:10). Junge describes the noun *mrw.t* (> Coptic *merit*) in a Late Egyptian context as denoting not only “love, wish, desire,” but also “**choice**, selection (in the sense of loving hierarchically from ‘above’).”<sup>24</sup>

The Hebrew adjective *yāqār/yēqārâ* (“precious, valuable”; “noble”)<sup>25</sup> is associated with Wisdom, happiness/asherah and the Tree of Life: “**Happy** [‘āšrê] is the man that findeth wisdom ... she is more **precious** [yēqārâ] than rubies ... she is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and **happy**[mē’uššār] is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:13-18; cf. 1 Nephi 8:10; 11:21-23).<sup>26</sup> Alma’s description of Mary as “precious” is particularly interesting in this light. Nephi himself introduces the tree as “the tree which is **most**<sup>27</sup> **precious** above all” (1 Nephi 11:9).

Alma’s use of language that alludes to Isaiah 7:14 (“Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin [‘ālmâ]<sup>28</sup> shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call

24 Friedrich Junge, *Late Egyptian Grammar: An Introduction*. 2nd English ed. (tr. David Warburton; Oxford: Griffith Institute, 2005), 335. One is reminded here of the language of Gabriel in Luke 1:28, 30: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women”; “Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.”

25 Cf. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 432. Hereafter cited as HALOT.

26 Cf. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” 24.

27 Reading with Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 747. The original text reads “most precious.” The printer’s manuscript and the 1830 edition read “precious.”

28 Alma’s own name derives from a masculine form (*‘elem* = “young man”) of the same noun (*\*‘lm* < *ġlm*). See further Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 76; Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” *JBMS* 7/1 (1998): 72-73; Terrence L. Szink, “New Light: Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma,” *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 70. See further Terrence L. Szink, “The Personal Name ‘Alma’ at Ebla,” *Religious Educator* 1/1 (2000): 53-56. John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, in “Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions,” *JBMS*

his name Immanuel.”) and 1 Nephi 11 (see further below) is unmistakable. His use of the adjective “precious” additionally recalls Nephi’s description of the tree of life and its fruit to his brothers in 1 Nephi 15:36: “Wherefore, the wicked are **rejected** separated<sup>29</sup> from the righteous, and also from that tree of life, **whose fruit is most precious and most desirable above**<sup>30</sup> **all other fruits**; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of God.” Alma himself elsewhere alludes to Lehi and Nephi’s visions of the tree of life when he describes the “fruit” of faith and faithfulness as “desirable” (Alma 32:39) and “**most precious**, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is **white above all that is white**, yea, and pure above all that is pure” (Alma 32:42), language not only recalling Nephi’s description of the tree of life and its fruit, but the virgin that he saw in 1 Nephi 11.

Nephi reports Lehi as describing the tree of life and its fruit from the very first in terms of “desire” and “happiness” or “joy”: “And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was **desirable** to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10; cf. 11:22-23). Lehi’s phraseology deliberately plays on the language of the Garden Story and its description of “a tree to be desired to make one wise” (Genesis 3:6) and, as Daniel C. Peterson has noted, the expression “make one happy” likely constitutes a wordplay on Hebrew *’ašrê* “happy” (lit. “happineses”) and the term *asherah* (*’āshērâ*),<sup>31</sup> a term which ultimately derives from the name Athirat (*’irt*), the consort of El in the Canaanite pantheon, but was later used to describe a carved pole, which like the menorah, represented a kind of stylized tree of life.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Nephi records other instances in which his father Lehi connects the tree of life and its fruit with “desire” and “desirability” of the fruit of the tree:

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9/1 (2000): 41-51; Matthew L. Bowen, “‘And He Was a Young Man’: The Literary Preservation of Alma’s Autobiographical Wordplay” *Insights* 30/4 (2010): 2-4.

29 Reading with Skousen, *Earliest Text*, 750.

30 Reading with Skousen (Ibid.). The original text has “of.” The printer’s manuscript and the 1830 edition read “above.”

31 Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” 24.

32 Ibid., 22.

And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be **desirous** that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that **it was desirable above all other fruit.** (1 Nephi 8:12)

And it came to pass that I beckoned unto them; and I also did say unto them with a loud voice that they should come unto me, and partake of the fruit, which was **desirable above all other fruit.** (1 Nephi 8:15)

While the Hebrew term for “desire” is represented by the root *\*hmd* (see especially Genesis 3:6) the commonest Egyptian term was *mr(i)*, whence the name “Mary” derives. Although Lehi’s description of the tree with its fruit lays tremendous emphasis on the “desirability” of the fruit of the tree, the meaning of the tree and its fruit was not immediately evident to any of his sons. Evidently, even Nephi did not understand the meaning of this image until he “desired” to know. The apparent opaqueness of the symbolism was clearly a point of contention among his brothers who argued over what their father’s vision signified. After his own vision, Nephi understood the connection between the tree, the fruit of the tree, the “mother of God”<sup>33</sup> according to the flesh, and her divine Son.

### “The Most Desirable Above All Things”: Wordplay Involving the Meaning of the Name “Mary” in 1 Nephi 11

Nephi’s description of the “tree of life, whose fruit is **most precious** and **most desirable of all other fruits**” as “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (1 Nephi 15:36, Original Text) was addressed particularly to his brethren (“And thus I spake unto my brethren,” 15:36), who had repeated difficulty “believing” the words of Lehi their father and Nephi’s words.<sup>34</sup> Having

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33 Following Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 — 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 230-33; idem, *Earliest Text*, 748.

34 See, e.g., 1 Nephi 2:12-13; 17:18; cf. 1 Nephi 12:22. See further Matthew L. Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit: Its Generational Consequences and Its

already considered Alma's later collocation describing Mary as a "**precious** and chosen vessel" (Alma 7:10), Nephi's above description of the "tree" whose fruit is "most desirable above all" can be seen as a wordplay on the name — or on the meaning of the name — "Mary" (< *mr(i)*, "love," "desire," "wish"). This becomes even clearer when we consider the dialogue between Nephi and his angelic guide, where a clear connection is made between the "tree" (cf. Asherah and the asherah), Mary, "the love of God," and "desirab[ility]":

And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white. And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou? And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins. And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God? And I said unto him: I know that **he loveth his children**; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things. And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of God,<sup>35</sup> after the manner of the flesh. And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look! And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms. And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is **the love of God**,

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Remedy" in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision: The Fortieth Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, Stanley A. Johnson; Provo, UT: RSC and Deseret Book, 2011), 240-263.

35 Following Skousen, *Earliest Text*, 748.

which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is **the most desirable above all things**. And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. (1 Nephi 11:13-23)

Just as Nephi's recognition and identification of the "rod of iron" as the "word of God" turns on (or hinges upon) the polysemy of Egyptian *mdw* ("rod," "staff"; "word," "speak"),<sup>36</sup> Nephi's recognition and identification of the "love of God" as the "most desirable above all things" turns on the polysemy of *mry* ("love," "desire," "wish"). It is worth noting here that though Benjamin and Alma mention Mary by name, Nephi offers the most dramatic, detailed, and developed description of Mary in the Book of Mormon text. Does it not seem strange then that Nephi would leave her name unmentioned, assuming he knew it? Where is her name? I propose that it is present, literally or implicitly, in Nephi's report in the polysemic play on "love" and "desire."

In other words, if the terms "love" and "desire" appear in Egyptian language on the plates, both words would be almost certainly be written as forms of *mr(i)*, thus literally placing her name in the text (like the placing of "Saul" ["asked"/"demanded"] in the verb \*š'l "ask," "request," "demand" in 1 Samuel 8:10; 12:13, 17 and elsewhere). Even the use of the Hebrew equivalents of the terms "love" and "desire" would cognitively revolve around the appearance of "the mother of God" in Nephi's text. Thus in either scenario, Nephi's consciousness of Mary's name and its meaning plausibly explains and motivates the dramatic emphasis on the "love of God" in 1 Nephi 11 and his understanding of the overall meaning of the tree-of-life vision. In 1 Nephi 11, the wordplay obviates the need for Nephi to mention her name in the way that Benjamin and Alma later mention it.

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36 1 Nephi 11:25; 15:22-23; Bowen, "What Meaneth the Rod?," 2-3.

As if for emphasis, Nephi iterates in 1 Nephi 11:25 that the “living waters [Heb. *mayyîm hayyîm*<sup>37</sup>] ... are a representation of the **love of God**; and ... that the tree of life was a representation of the **love of God**.” Again the emphasis here is not only the “rod” (the word of God), but the “love of God”: the “mother of God,” Mary, was a representation of the “love of God” (cf. Egyptian *mry[.t]-ntr*, “[be]loved of god”).<sup>38</sup> Water, of course, is a powerful symbol both of birth<sup>39</sup> and rebirth,<sup>40</sup> and thus baptism. It is at least noteworthy that Jesus describes the greatness or manifestation of the “love” of God in his own incarnation (“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son,” John 3:16) in the context of the necessity of baptism — being “born again” or “born from above” (*gennēthēnai anōthen*, see John 3:3-8) in his likeness. When Alma the Younger speaks of the “song of redeeming love”<sup>41</sup> he not only commemorates Israel’s ancestors being “redeemed” (Exodus 15:1-22)<sup>42</sup> or “pulled ... from the waters” like Moses — a name which incidentally connotes “begotten [of deity]” or “[the deity is] born” (< Egyptian *ms[i]* “beget”) and “drawer” or “puller” (Heb. *Mōšeh*, is pointed as a pseudo-active participle of \**mšh/mšy*,<sup>43</sup> Exodus 2:10), but also baptism and being “born

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37 The phrase “living waters” (*mayyîm hayyîm*) is attested in Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13; Zechariah 14:8; Song of Solomon 4:15. The variation “waters of life” is attested in Alma 5:34; 42:27; and D&C 10:66. The variation “water of life” is attested thrice in Revelation 22:1 (cf. 1-2), 17; 21:6.

38 See Michel Gitton, *Les Divines Épouses de la 18e Dynasty*, (Annales Littéraires de la Université Besançon, 306; Paris, Besançon, 1984), p. 6 note 6. See also Edouard Naville and Howard Carter, *The Tomb of Hâtshopsîtû* (London: A. Constable & Co., 1906), 109. The name “Amy” or “Aimee” in French means essentially the same thing as “Mary” in Egyptian (“beloved”).

39 Exodus 2:10; Isaiah 48:1; Moses 6:59.

40 John 3:5; Moses 6:59; D&C 5:16.

41 Alma 5:9, 26; 26:13.

42 Exodus 15 contains two “songs” of redeeming love, the Song of the Sea (vv. 1-19) and the Song of Miriam (vv. 21-22). There are further connections between Exodus 15 and Mosiah 18 that cannot be explored here.

43 See James K. Hoffmeier, “Moses,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, et al.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 417; Michael P. O’Connor, “The Human Characters’ Names in the Ugaritic Poems: Onomastic Eccentricity in Bronze-Age West Semitic and the



again.<sup>44</sup> Alma the Younger will describe his being “born again” as being “snatched”<sup>45</sup> (cf. *yaměšēnī*, “he drew me [pulled me] out of many waters,” 2 Samuel 22/Psalm 18:17 [16]; cf. Moses 1:25).<sup>46</sup> His father Alma the Elder, like Moses anciently, “pulled” his people from the waters of baptism or rebirth (1 Corinthians 10:2) — the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18), the pure waters (versus bitter or filthy waters) which Mormon’s text tells us symbolized “desire” or “love.”

### “If This Be the Desire of Your Hearts”: The Origin and Etymology of “Mormon” and Alma’s Remotivation of Its Meaning

According to Mormon, King Noah was responsible for naming the land of Mormon and its environs: “And it came to pass that as many as did believe him did go forth to **a place which was called Mormon, having received its name from the king, being in the borders of the land** having been infested, by times or at seasons, by wild beasts” (Mosiah 18:4). Although the text here does not specifically name Noah as the king, it seems clear from the language of Mosiah 18:31 that Noah is the king alluded to in both passages (“And these things were done **in the borders of the land**, that they might not come to the knowledge of **the king**”).<sup>47</sup> The naming of Mormon would

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Name Daniel in Particular,” in *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting Typological and Historical Perspectives* (ed. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 270-271, especially notes 7-8.

44 See Mosiah 27:25; Alma 5:49; 7:14; cf. John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:3; Moses 6:59.

45 Mosiah 27:28-29; cf. Alma 26:17; and the whole of Alma 36.

46 Moses 1:25: “And calling upon the name of God, he beheld his glory again, for it was upon him; and he heard a voice, saying: Blessed art thou, Moses, for I, the Almighty, have chosen thee, and **thou shalt be made stronger than many waters**; for they shall obey thy command as if thou wert God.” Moses (“drawer”) will “draw” or “pull” Israel out of many waters (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:2: “And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea”).

47 One could conjecture that Noah’s father Zeniff is the intended referent of “the king,” but there is no specific evidence of this and in the context of the narrative it could hardly be anybody other than Noah. Moreover, there is no

thus constitute one of the few positive aspects of Noah's reign and legacy.

But what does the name Mormon mean? In a two part study, Paul Hoskisson explored possible origins and etymologies for the name Mormon.<sup>48</sup> I concur with Hoskisson (and President Gordon B. Hinckley)<sup>49</sup> that the "more good" etymology (from the 1843 *Times and Seasons* letter) with which many Latter-day Saints are familiar, and which is often taken as authoritative, is instead figurative (i.e., the Bible is the "good" book, the Book of Mormon is a book of "more good").<sup>50</sup> This pseudo-etymology was formulated as satirical response to ridicule antimormon polemical treatment of the name "Mormon" such as Eber D. Howe's (1834)<sup>51</sup> and an anonymous editorialist's (1841)<sup>52</sup>

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evidence that "Mormon" was the name of an earlier king who had reigned in the land of Nephi before Mosiah's departure therefrom.

48 Paul Y. Hoskisson, "What's in a Name? Mormon — Part 1" *Insights* 32/2 (2012) 2-3; idem, "What's in a Name? Mormon — Part 2" *Insights* 32/3 (2012): 2.

49 Gordon B. Hinckley, "Mormon Should Mean 'More Good,'" *Ensign*, November 1990, 51-54; Cited in Hoskisson, "What's in a Name? Mormon — Part 2," 2-3. Hoskisson credits his use of this talk to Dustin Schwanger.

50 Ibid.

51 "The English word *Mormon*, the name given to [Joseph Smith's] book, is the English termination of the Greek word, "*Mormoo*," which we find defined in an old obsolete Dictionary "*bug-bear, hob-goblin, raw head, and bloody bones*." It seems, therefore, that the writer gave his book not only a very appropriate, but classical name. His experiment upon the human mind, he thought, would be more perfect, by giving it a name, in addition to its context, which would carry upon its very face, the nature of its true character — *a fiction of hob-goblins and bug-bears*. (emphasis as in the original). Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: Howe, 1834), 21. As Hoskisson ("What's in a Name? Mormon — Part 1," 2) notes, "Almost any knowledgeable reader, even in 1834, would have recognized that this definition is not only fabricated but downright silly."

52 "Any person that understands the reformed Egyptian tongue, or even has but a superficial knowledge of it, must know that the very term or word Mormon, must forever blast its pretensions to any thing like having a divine origin. I will here give you the signification of the word Mormon, and also, book of Mormon, which every person that has read a dictionary of the reformed Egyptian tongue knows to be correct.

*Mormon* — A writer of wicked, absurd, fictitious nonsense, for evil purposes, to make sorcerers.

*Book of Mormon* — A book of gross fictitious nonsense, wrote by

laughable etymologies. It makes sense, as Hoskisson notes, that the “more good” etymology offered in the 1843 *Times and Seasons* letter and which was likely penned by primarily by William W. Phelps<sup>53</sup> and “printed over the name of the prophet” was perhaps “meant to ape the flippant anti-Mormon literature of the previous ten years” since “satire is a tempting resort to satire.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, “more good” was almost certainly W.W. Phelps’s tongue-in cheek etymology for “Mormon” penned in the Prophet’s name. The origins of — and thus clues and evidence as to the meaning of the name “Mormon,” are instead to be sought elsewhere, including within the book itself.

As noted above, the name “Mormon” had been bestowed upon the place and waters of Mormon, by King Noah (see Mosiah 18:4, 31). One of the first comments ever made about King Noah in the cycle that deals with him, his priests, and the consequences that their policies brought upon their subjects, specifically addresses his “desires.” Mormon informs us that upon succeeding his father Zeniff, King Noah “did not keep the commandments of God, but he **did walk after the desires of his own heart**. And he had many wives and concubines. And he did cause his people to commit sin, and do that which was abominable in the sight of the Lord. Yea, and they did commit whoredoms and all manner of wickedness.” (Mosiah 11:2)

In Mosiah 16:12, Abinadi speaks tacitly of Noah and his priests in describing the wicked as having “gone according to

Mormon, for Gazelom’s diabolical purposes.

*Mormons* — Anciently in Egypt — a set of black-legs, thieves, robbers, and murderers.

Now, how can it be possible any person can call it divine! It is astonishing!” (emphasis and spelling as in original) “Communications,” *Warsaw Signal*, Vol. 2, No. 14 (August 11, 1841). The anonymous writer of the letter to the editor styles himself the “translator.”

53 From Joseph Smith’s journal (published in Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989], 378) one entry states: “Saturday, May 20[th] 10 A.M. ... In the office heart Bro[ther] Phelps read a definition [sic] of the Word Mormon – More-Good – corrected and sent to press.” Cited by Hoskisson, “What’s in a Name? Mormon — Part 1,” 2.

54 Ibid.

their own carnal **wills and desires.**” In this description we hear perhaps an echo of Jacob’s unhappiness with the Nephites who under their second king “began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as like unto David of old **desiring** many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son” (Jacob 1:15). Noah’s reign is, significantly, described in terms similar to Solomon’s.<sup>55</sup>

Nephi’s account of his vision of the tree of life contrasts the “**desires** of [the] great and abominable church” (1 Nephi 13:8),<sup>56</sup> i.e., the “great and spacious building” (cf. Noah’s “spacious palace,” Mosiah 11:9)<sup>57</sup> opposite the tree of life in his vision, with the fruit of the tree of which is “**the most desirable** above all things” and the “most joyous to the soul.” Nephi knows that the transitory and ephemeral “desires” granted by the “mother of abominations”<sup>58</sup> are nothing compared to the “desirable[ness]” of the “love of God” made manifest in the child held in the arms of “the mother of God after the manner of the flesh”<sup>59</sup>: the Savior Jesus Christ who made it possible for us to keep anything that is ultimately worth having, especially our families (“And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be **desirous** that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that **it was desirable desirous**<sup>60</sup> **above all other fruit,**” 1 Nephi 8:12).

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55 E.g., Solomon’s building projects (1 Kings 9:15-23) ostensibly described as lighter on the Israelites (vs. the Canaanites, vv. 22-23), but are later revealed as oppressive to the Israelites (1 Kings 12:3-15).

56 1 Nephi 13:8: “And the angel spake unto me, saying: Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church.”

57 Also compare the list of apparel in 1 Nephi 13:8 with Lehi’s description in 1 Nephi 8:27: “And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit.”

58 1 Nephi 14:9-10, 13, 16; cf. D&C 88:94.

59 1 Nephi 11:18, reading with Skousen, *Earliest Text*, 748.

60 Reading with Skousen, *Earliest Text*, 747.

The Egyptian element *mr(i)*, from which the name “Mary” is derived, is also most plausibly the first element in the name “Mormon” as Hugh Nibley proposed long ago.<sup>61</sup> The best candidate — or the least problematic candidate — for the second element is Egyptian *mn* (“be firm, established, enduring,” “steadfast,” “remain”).<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Urrutia proposes that the “Mormon” derives from a combination of *mr(i)* (“love”) + *mn* with the meaning “love established forever,”<sup>63</sup> or as Robert F. Smith phrases it, “strong/firm love” or “love remains steadfast/firm.”<sup>64</sup> Even if the scientific etymology differs slightly (or even greatly) from the foregoing suggestions — which I suspect are near the mark — the plausible presence of lexical elements corresponding to *mr(i)* and *mn* are sufficient to posit onomastic wordplay or play on meaning. The lexemes *mr(i)* and *mn* can, at the very least, be heard in the name “Mormon” (i.e., they are *phonologically* evident).

Bearing in mind, however, that the range of meaning (polysemy) of Egyptian *mr(i)* as a noun and verb includes both “love” and “desire,” let us observe how the name “Mormon” is first used in connection with “desire.” Mosiah 18:4 indicates that King Noah, who, as Mormon earlier informed us, “did walk after the desires of his own heart”<sup>65</sup> and had “gone according to [his] own carnal [will] and desires,”<sup>66</sup> bestowed

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61 Hugh Nibley proposed “Meryamon” or “Moriamon” (“beloved of Amon”). The primary problem here is theological — the use of the Egyptian theophoric Amon. See Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 287. Cf. also p. 500, where he also suggests a connection with Egyptian *mr-* “intention, wish, desire.” He also proposes a connection with Arabic *marām* (from the verb *rāma*), “wish, desire, craving, longing; aspiration” (see Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, 4th ed., ed. J.M. Cowan [Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994], 428). An Egyptian etymology, in any case, is to be preferred.

62 CDME, 106.

63 Benjamin Urrutia, “The Name Connection,” *New Era*, June 1983, 40; see also Hoskisson, “What’s in a Name? Mormon — Part 2,” 3.

64 Hoskisson (Ibid.) cites this as a suggestion made by Robert F. Smith, who has made numerous suggestions regarding Book of Mormon names which have been included in the Book of Mormon Onomasticon Project.

65 Mosiah 11:2.

66 Mosiah 16:12; cf. D&C 3:4.

the name “Mormon” upon “the place of Mormon” with its forests and “fountains” of “pure water” (18:5) presumably on account of the fact that their physical beauty (cf. Mosiah 18:30) educed or awakened “strong/firm desire,” “everlasting desire,” “everlasting love” or “enduring love.” If this is the case, we can be sure that Alma’s people took a higher view of what that “desire” or “love” should have been (see especially Mormon 18:8-11, 28 and discussion further below). For them, this “desire” was primarily spiritual rather than physical (cf. Abinadi’s teaching in Mosiah 15:5).

It must be significant that neither Alma nor his people make any attempt to rename “the place of Mormon,” “the waters of Mormon” or “the forest of Mormon” from what the king (Noah) had named it. In fact, the word “desire” is a *Leitwort* (leadword or key term)<sup>67</sup> in Alma’s baptismal speech and his articulation of the covenant that the people of his community were entering into. Alma’s speech, I propose, is not simply a covenant speech but a conscious attempt at “remotivating” the name “Mormon,” which Noah had bestowed on this locale, with connotations more in line with his community’s newfound values and more appropriate to their activities there:

And it came to pass that he said unto them: Behold, here are the waters of **Mormon** (for thus were they called) and now, as ye **are desirous** to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with

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67 See Martin Buber (“Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation* [ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox; ISBL; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994] 114) coined the term *Leitwort* (“lead-word,” or “guiding word”) and defines it thus: “By *Leitwort* I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or a sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic. As noted, what is repeated need not be a single word but can be a word root; indeed the diversity of forms strengthens the overall dynamic effect.” See also idem, עיונים בדפוסי־סגנון בתנ״ך (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1964), 284.

those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life — Now I say unto you, **if this be the desire of your hearts**, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? And now when the people had heard these words, they clapped their hands for joy, and exclaimed: **This is the desire of our hearts.** (Mosiah 18:8-11)

We note that Alma's speech begins with an invocation of the name "Mormon": "Behold here are the waters of Mormon." Alma then connects the people's coming into the "waters of Mormon" with being "desirous" to "come into the fold of God" and all that these words imply in terms of bearing the burdens of other church members, mourning with and comforting them, etc. Alma then resumes, "now if I say, if this be the **desire** of your hearts," directing their attention to entering the waters of baptism that will symbolize their "enter[ing] into a covenant" in effect to "keep his commandments that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon" them (cf. 1 Nephi 11:22; 2 Nephi 31:20). In response, the people out of "joy" exclaim, "this is the desire of our hearts!" Alma's language recalls Lehi and Nephi's visions of the tree of life and the fruit which was "desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10) and "desirous"<sup>68</sup> above all other fruit" (8:12) and the "love of God" which was "most desirable above all things" (11:22). It also recalls Lehi's being "desirous that [his] family should partake of [the fruit] also" (8:12).

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68 Reading with Skousen, *Earliest Text*, 747.

Mormon further informs us that this baptismal covenant had the community seeing “eye to eye”<sup>69</sup> or with “one eye” (Mosiah 18:21) and were “at-one” in “love”: “And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in **love** one towards another” (Mosiah 18:21). Mormon further describes that the people were obliged to “impart of their substance of their own free will and **good desires** towards God, and to those priests that stood in need, yea, and to every needy, naked soul” (Mosiah 18:28).<sup>70</sup>

The blessings of the covenant life experienced at Mormon were so wonderful to the 450 souls who partook of them that the place, its waters, and forest were remembered in a hymn that Mormon, who as has been noted was named after this place with its forests and waters, preserves for us:

And now it came to pass that all this was done in  
**Mormon**, yea, by the waters of Mormon, in the forest

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69 Isaiah 52:8; Mosiah 12:22; 15:29; 3 Nephi 16:18. Alma seems to have specifically had Abinadi’s use of Isaiah’s prophecy in mind when he organized his church in/at the land, forest, and waters of Mormon.

70 When the “desires” of Alma’s people go beyond those enumerated in their covenant and the covenant “love” that maintained equality and unity within their community, Alma corrects them: “And the people **were desirous** that Alma should be their king, for **he was beloved** by his people. But he said unto them: Behold, it is not expedient that we should have a king; for thus saith the Lord: **Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another**, or one man shall not think himself above another; therefore I say unto you it is not expedient that ye should have a king” (Mosiah 23:6-7). The connection between the people’s being “desirous” and Alma’s being “beloved by his people” is reminiscent of Nephi’s description of the “love of God” which is “desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:22), a concept which may connect to the idea of *mr(i)* as “love” and “desire.” Alma, however, knows that for the community to “esteem one flesh above another” to have one member of the community “think himself above another” would ultimately undermine the “love” of God “one towards another” (Mosiah 18:21; cf. 1 Nephi 11:22) and “good desires” that were the hallmark of their church. Alma knew that he could not be their “beloved” or their “king” (e.g., David the “beloved”). The solution was for “every man” to “love his neighbor as himself, that there should be no contention among them” (Mosiah 23:15). Their king was the “beloved Son” who was the manifestation of the “love of God.”



that was near the waters of Mormon; yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer; yea, and how blessed are they, for they shall sing to his praise forever. (Mosiah 18:30)

The hymn, in language reminiscent of Isaiah (“How beautiful upon the mountains . . .” Isaiah 52:7)<sup>71</sup> and Abinadi’s use of Isaiah, helps us understand the role of the beautiful waters, forest, and land of Mormon in fostering the enduring “desire” and abiding “love” that remained in the hearts of Alma’s people “forever.” It further helps understand just how powerful the memory of these events remained in the church that Alma himself established and that was reestablished (or reorganized) later by Jesus himself (see 3 Nephi 11–27). Mormon’s father, Mormon,<sup>72</sup> was named after them — just like Mormon himself — by parents who, by then, were already living in an epoch of declining faith, hope, and charity and thus celebrated the memory and legacy of “the first church which was established among [their ancestors] after their transgression” (3 Nephi 5:12).<sup>73</sup>

“Desire” also serves as a *Leitwort* in Mormon’s description of Limhi’s people who are “desirous” to become like Alma and the covenant community/church that he formed at the waters of Mormon:

And it came to pass that king Limhi and many of his people **were desirous to be baptized**; but there was none in the land that had authority from God.

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71 See also 1 Nephi 13:37; Mosiah 12:21 and Abinadi’s response in Mosiah 15; 3 Nephi 20:40; D&C 128:19.

72 Mormon 1:5: “And I, Mormon, being a descendant of Nephi, (and my father’s name was Mormon) I remembered the things which Ammaron commanded me.”

73 3 Nephi 5:12: “And behold, I am called Mormon, being called after the land of Mormon, the land in which Alma did establish the church among the people, yea, the first church which was established among them after their transgression.”

And Ammon declined doing this thing, considering himself an unworthy servant. Therefore they did not at that time form themselves into a church, waiting upon the Spirit of the Lord. Now **they were desirous to become even as Alma and his brethren**, who had fled into the wilderness. **They were desirous to be baptized as a witness and a testimony that they were willing to serve God with all their hearts**; nevertheless they did prolong the time; and an account of their baptism shall be given hereafter. (Mosiah 21:33-35)

The expression “were desirous” here recalls Alma’s covenant speech at the waters of Mormon, focusing the reader’s attention on the importance of desires. Additionally, it suggests that Mormon is not only aware of Alma’s onomastic wordplay on “Mormon” and “desire” (Mosiah 18:8-11), but that he is purposefully replicating it in his abridgment of his sources. This seems particularly appropriate given that “Mormon” was the name that our author/editor/compiler inherited specifically as a legacy of these events.

Mormon does something similar in Mosiah 25, as Limhi’s people reunite with Alma’s people and the Nephites and Mulekites of Zarahemla:

And it came to pass that after Alma had taught the people many things, and had made an end of speaking to them, that king Limhi was **desirous** that he might be **baptized**; and all his people were **desirous** that they might be **baptized** also. Therefore, Alma did go forth into the water and did **baptize** them; yea, he did **baptize** them after the manner he did his brethren **in the waters of Mormon**; yea, and as many as he did **baptize** did belong to the church of God; and this because of their belief on the words of Alma. (Mosiah 25:17-18)

Here again, Mormon stresses the connection between “desires” or “desirousness” with the name Mormon and being baptized. Here, however, they are not baptized *in* the waters of Mormon — since that opportunity was no longer available — but they are baptized “after the manner [that Alma] did baptize his brethren in the waters of Mormon. Thus they entered the same “Mormon” covenant predicated upon the same “desires” (Mosiah 18:8-11, 28).

### Singing “Redeeming Love”

The impact of Alma’s people’s experiences at the waters of Mormon remains evident generations afterward. In the second generation, Alma the younger (following his own conversion experience) recalled his father Alma baptizing his people at the waters and the redemptive experiences that followed (Alma 5:3-13). Alma here and elsewhere<sup>74</sup> uses language reminiscent of the Exodus story to describe his father’s people’s deliverance from bondage. “And again I ask, were the bands of death broken, and the chains of hell which encircled them about, were they loosed? I say unto you, Yea, they were loosed, and their souls did expand, and they did **sing redeeming love**. And I say unto you that they are saved” (Alma 5:9); “And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to **sing the song of redeeming love**, I would ask, can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26). The expression “redeeming love,” while recalling God’s “love” for Israel in redeeming them from Egypt, also recalls the “desire”/“love” that Alma the Younger’s father, Alma the Elder, and the latter’s people experienced at the waters, place, and forest of Mormon (Mosiah 18:8-11, 21, 28) and the redemption from “bondage” that they experienced subsequently in the land of Helam (see Mosiah 23-24).

Ammon, once Alma’s compatriot in trying to destroy the Church, uses language similar to Alma’s description of being “born again”:

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<sup>74</sup> Mosiah 27:16; Alma 29:11-12; Alma 36:2, 29.

Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has he loosed from the pains of hell; and they are brought to **sing redeeming love**, and this because of the power of his word which is in us, therefore have we not great reason to **rejoice**? Yea, we have reason to praise him forever, for he is the Most High God, and has loosed our brethren from the chains of hell. Yea, they were encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction; but behold, he has brought them into his everlasting light, yea, into everlasting salvation; and they are **encircled about with the matchless bounty of his love**; yea, and we have been instruments in his hands of doing this great and marvelous work. (Alma 26:13-15)

God's "love" for his children (1 Nephi 11:17, 22), like the tree of life, produces "fruit" in the Lamanites in the form of "love" for their fellow human beings (2 Nephi 31:20), i.e., for their now "beloved brethren":

Now behold, we can look forth and see the fruits of our labors; and are they few? I say unto you, Nay, they are many; yea, and we can witness of their sincerity, because of their **love** towards their brethren and also towards us. For behold, they had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy; and they have buried their weapons of war deep in the earth, because of their **love** towards their brethren. And now behold I say unto you, has there been so great **love** in all the land? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, there has not, even among the Nephites. For behold, they would take up arms against their brethren; they would not suffer themselves to be slain. But behold how many of these have laid down their lives; and we know that they have gone to their God, because of their **love** and of their hatred to sin. (Alma 26:31-34; see also Alma 26:9; 27:4)

The atonement of Christ also bore fruit in the form of baptism and lasting conversion. In other words, the “love” of God “remained” or “endured”: “And it came to pass when they were all baptized and had come up out of the water, the Holy Ghost did fall upon them, and they were **filled with the Holy Ghost and with fire**” (3 Nephi 19:13). The effect of baptism by water and by fire is to be “filled with **desire**” (3 Nephi 19:24), i.e., to be “filled with **love**” (see especially Moroni 7:48, and below)<sup>75</sup> i.e., to “be filled with **love towards God** and all men” (Mosiah 2:4; cf. 4:12), in Mormon’s words. Alma taught his son Shiblon that one needed to “bridle [one’s] passions” — one form of desire — in order to be “filled with **love**” a much higher and nobler form of “desire” or *mr(i)* (Alma 38:12; cf. 41:3). All of these expressions recall Nephi’s equation of the tree of life with “the **love** of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most **desirable** above all things” (1 Nephi 11:22; cf. 2 Nephi 4:21).

**“Everlasting Love,” or, the “Love [that] Endureth Forever”**

Mormon the son of Mormon’s life’s work very much consisted of “loving” broken people, most of whom were putting ever greater distance between themselves and God. If we consider, as discussed previously, that the name “Mormon” contains elements that can be rendered (or came to mean) “love is enduring” or “everlasting love” we can more fully appreciate the arc of Mormon’s life as well as all that he had to say on the subject of charity and love. Regarding the Nephite armies that he was called to lead at the age of sixteen, he said:

Behold, I had led them, notwithstanding their wickedness I had led them many times to battle, and **had loved them, according to the love of God** which was in me, with all my heart; and my soul had been poured out in prayer unto my God all the day long

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<sup>75</sup> The expression “filled with love” is attested in 2 Nephi 4:21; Mosiah 2:4; 4:12; Alma 38:12; Moroni 7:48.

for them; nevertheless, it was without faith, because of the hardness of their hearts. (Mormon 3:12)

Mormon lived true to his name. With his society and even his church falling apart around him, Mormon chose to allow the “love of God” to abide in him, and to continue to “love.”

Mormon’s life was not only characterized by “love,” but “everlasting love” — “the pure of love of Christ” — defined it. When Mormon as leader of a failing Nephite church addressed a dwindling group of Nephite faithful on the necessity of obtaining charity as a gift of the spirit (as later recorded by Moroni), he knew whereof he spoke. To the end, both Mormon and Moroni refer to the Lamanites — the very people who slaughtered their family, kindred, and friends — as “beloved brethren.”<sup>76</sup> Mormon and Moroni also knew that what saved those few faithful saints individually, and what would save millions more faithful saints of a latter day collectively and individually, would be charity — the very love that God manifested toward his children — the human family (John 3:16; 1 Nephi 11:22). And so Mormon, in an apparent wordplay on his own name, authoritatively declares:

But charity is the pure **love** of Christ, and it **endureth forever**; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore, my **beloved** brethren, **pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love**, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ [cf. 3 Nephi 5:12-13!] ... (Moroni 7:47-48)

As reported by Moroni, Mormon here glosses “charity” for his hearers as “the pure love of Christ [which] endureth forever.” This close juxtaposition of the terms “love” and “endureth forever” fits nicely with the proposed etymology of Mormon, i.e., “love is enduring/abiding” (see above). Most readers will note the clear parallelism between Mormon’s

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76 See Moroni 10:18-19.

description of charity and Paul's in 1 Corinthians 13, the "Hymn to Charity." Although Mormon clearly did not have access to Paul's writings, both men are plausibly quoting from a common source, perhaps one to which Nephi also had access on the brass plates<sup>77</sup> many years before Paul and Mormon. In any case, Mormon says that charity not only "endures all things" (Moroni 7:45; cf. 1 Corinthians 13:7) and "abides," but that it "endureth forever," wording that differs from Paul's version of the hymn, but still matches the semantics of the proposed wordplay involving Egyptian *mn*.<sup>78</sup>

The description of the "pure love of Christ" recalls the covenant of "love" that Alma's people made at the "pure"<sup>79</sup> waters of Mormon. It also recalls the "pure" fruit of the tree of life as described by Alma the Younger: "behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and **pure above all that is pure**; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled" (Alma 32:42). Additionally, Mormon's language recalls Jacob 3:2, "O all

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77 cf. 2 Nephi 26; 31–33, which redound with language and themes found in the Hymn to Charity.

78 The Hymn to Charity in 1 Corinthians 13 describes how charity "endureth [*hypomenei*] all things" (v. 7) and "abideth [*menei*]." Both verbs, derive from Greek *menō* ("remain, stay; "continue," "abide" (see Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 630–631). cf. Latin *maneo*, which has virtually the same range of meaning as Greek *menō* and, like the latter, may be related to Egyptian *mn*. It would thus also be related to Hebrew \**mn*. English "permanent" derives from Latin *permaneo*, a form of the same verb, whose semantic range overlaps with Egyptian *mn* ("be firm, established, enduring," "steadfast," "remain"; see CMDE, 106). The former seems to either derive from or be related to the latter, and both seem to be related to the Hebrew verbal root \**mn* (Cf. John Tvedtnes's discussion of \**mn* in "Notes and Communications: Faith and Truth," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/2 (1994): 114–17), which has the basic meaning "to be firm, trustworthy, safe" and thus "to remain faithful ... to be permanent, endure" (HALOT, 63–65). If Nephi and Mormon had access to an earlier version of this hymn it is not implausible that such a version contained the word or phoneme *mn* (and perhaps too the word *mr(i)*, although any such scenario is admittedly very speculative at best.

79 See Mosiah 18:5.

ye that are **pure** in heart, lift up your heads and receive the pleasing word of God, and **feast upon his love**; for ye may, if your minds are **firm**, forever.” Like the latter passage, Mormon’s speech on faith, hope, and charity recalls Nephi’s vision of the tree of life and Nephi’s formulation of the gospel derived from his vision of the tree: “Wherefore, ye must press forward with **steadfastness** in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a **love of God and of all men**. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and **endure** to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20). This passage particularly influenced Mormon’s speech in Mormon 7.

In addition to his definition of charity recorded in Moroni 7:47-48 (“love ... [that] endureth forever”), Mormon similarly defines and describes charity in a letter written to his son Moroni on the subject of the baptizing of small children:

Behold, I speak with boldness, having authority from God; and I fear not what man can do; for **perfect love** casteth out all fear. And I am filled with **charity**, which is **everlasting love** (cf. “Mormon”); wherefore, all children are alike unto me; wherefore, **I love** little children with a **perfect love**; and they are all alike and partakers of salvation. (Moroni 8:16-17)

Here Mormon glosses “charity” as “everlasting love” which, again, suggests that the words being used for both — whatever they were — are not the same. Speaking with divine “authority,” Mormon speaks as if he were the Lord himself. Like Jesus’s disciples in 3 Nephi who are “filled with desire” (3 Nephi 19:24), of which he is now one (3 Nephi 5:12-13), Mormon is “filled with ... everlasting love” — the meaning of his name — the “love” which “sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:22) empowers Mormon to address the issue with boldness.

We note that in the first letter from Mormon to Moroni (Moroni 8) the specific issue is who should be baptized, an issue which inevitably recalls the events at the waters of Mormon



and the covenant of “love” and unity (“one eye,” “one baptism”) that was based on the good “desires” of the heart (Mosiah 18:8-11, 21, 28). Since the smallest children are “whole from the foundation of the world” and do not have “desires” for baptism unto repentance, there is no need to baptize them:

Behold, my son, this thing ought not to be; for repentance is unto them that are under condemnation and under the curse of a broken law. And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins; And the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter **filleth** with hope and **perfect love, which love endureth** by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God. (Moroni 8:24-26)

Mormon’s description of repentance and baptism as prerequisites to the reception of the Holy Ghost or Comforter which “filleth with hope and perfect love” and his statement that “love endureth by diligence unto prayer” is a deliberate allusion to and summation of his ancestor Nephi’s teachings on the doctrine of Christ (2 Nephi 31-32, especially 31:20). It is also a reminder of the “love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:22).

Importantly, Moroni also preserves a second letter from his father Mormon which captures just how depraved Nephite society had become. Where Alma’s church at the waters of Mormon had been characterized by their good “desires” toward God (Mosiah 18:8-11, 28) and “love” (18:21), Nephite society — a part from the few “peaceable followers of Christ”<sup>80</sup> — is now entirely absent of it: “For so exceedingly do they anger that it seemeth me that they have no fear of death; and they have **lost**

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80 Moroni 7:3-4.

**their love**, one towards another; and they thirst after blood and revenge continually” (Moroni 9:5).

Thus a linking term shared by all three texts authored by (or spoken by) Mormon included by Moroni at the end of his record is the word “love.” In both Moroni 7 and 8, Mormon describes the “love” requisite for eternal life in terms that match the most plausible etymology and meaning of “Mormon,” i.e., “love [that] endureth” or “everlasting love” (Moroni 7:47; 8:17, 26). Moroni 9:5 on the other hand emphasizes that the Nephites have entirely “lost” this “love.” It is reasonable, then, to surmise that not only is Moroni conscious of his father’s use of this term in connection with the latter’s own name, but that Moroni uses “love” as his basis for linking all three texts.

We see supporting evidence for this in Ether chapter 12, where Moroni discusses faith, hope, and charity in the context of the self-destruction of the Jaredite nation — a Gentile nation<sup>81</sup> which, like the Israelite Nephites, had utterly lost its “love.” Moroni knows that the only hope for the latter-day Gentiles is for them to obtain charity, “the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:22) or the “pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47):

And again, I remember that thou hast said that **thou hast loved the world**, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world, that thou mightest take it again to prepare a place for the children of men. And now **I know that this love which thou hast had for the children of men is charity**; wherefore, except men shall have **charity** they cannot inherit that place which thou hast prepared in the mansions of thy Father. Wherefore, I know by this thing which

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81 The Lord said to the Brother of Jared regarding the promised land to which he was leading them: “And there will I bless thee and thy seed, and raise up unto me of thy seed, and of the seed of thy brother, and they who shall go with thee, a great **nation**. And there shall be **none greater** than the **nation** which I will raise up unto me of thy seed, upon all the face of the earth. And thus I will do unto thee because this long time ye have cried unto me. Ether 1:43 sets the Jaredites up as a kind of type of the “mighty nation among the Gentiles” spoken of by Nephi in 1 Nephi 22:7.

thou hast said, that if the Gentiles have not **charity**, because of our weakness, that thou wilt prove them, and take away their talent, yea, even that which they have received, and give unto them who shall have more abundantly. And it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have **charity**. And it came to pass that the Lord said unto me: If they have not **charity** it mattereth not unto thee, thou hast been faithful; wherefore, thy garments shall be made clean. And because thou hast seen thy weakness thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father. And now I, Moroni, bid farewell unto the Gentiles, yea, and also unto **my brethren whom I love**, until we shall meet before the judgment-seat of Christ, where all men shall know that my garments are not spotted with your blood. (Ether 12:33-38)

Mormon and Moroni had witnessed with their own eyes how their own people “lost their love” (Moroni 9:5). Like the house of Israel, the Gentiles reject Christ, but for different reasons. The Gentiles have a problem: pride<sup>82</sup> and a lack of charity. Both Mormon and Moroni knew that pride, a lack of charity, and the concomitant loss of love necessarily results in the entire destruction of a society if not reversed.

Moroni’s description of the “love which thou hast had for the children of men” echoes Nephi’s description of the “love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:22). Like Nephi, Moroni knows that the solution for all of us — and especially for Zion — is charity, “which charity is love.” Except we “should have charity” we are, like the Nephites in the end, “nothing” (2 Nephi 26:30; Moroni 7:44, 46).<sup>83</sup>

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82 See especially Mormon 8:36.

83 See also 1 Corinthians 13:2-3; D&C 18:19.

To the end Moroni could say “my brethren whom I love,” which made him the worthy successor of his father Mormon: he had lived up to his father’s name. As “Mormons,” as the world is wont to call us, we can and ought to do likewise.

## Conclusion

Nephi’s account of his vision of the tree of life emphasizes “desires” and the “love of God” as manifest in the incarnation of Jesus Christ through Mary as being the “most desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:22). The connection between “love” and “desire” in this instance may in fact turn on the polysemy (range of meaning) of the Egyptian lexeme *mr(i)* (“love,” “desire”) from which the name Mary is derived. Similarly, Alma’s covenant speech at waters of “Mormon” (“love/desire is enduring”) (“everlasting love”) also emphasizes the “desires” of the heart requisite for entry into to a covenant community unified by “love” (Mosiah 18:8-11, 21, 28), which diametrically opposite the “desires” of King Noah’s heart, who originally named the land, waters, and forest of Mormon. This suggests that Alma and his people consciously re-motivated the name “Mormon” in terms of the covenant they made and the experiences they had in the environs of the waters, forest, and land of Mormon. Centuries later, Mormon’s descriptions of charity as “the love of Christ” which “endureth forever” and “everlasting love” become more meaningful when the proposed etymology of and onomastic play on “Mormon” are considered.

All of this has practical implications for us as Latter-day Saints or “Mormons.” Being a “Mormon” is not simply a matter of living up to the standard of being “more good” though that is important, but also a matter of aligning our “desires” with God’s will and to have those “desires” reflected in our covenant obedience, as Alma the Elder and his people learned (Mosiah 18; 23-24). Alma the Younger learned that “desires” needed to be disciplined (Alma 29:4-7; cf. Alma 38:12). Like Mormon and Moroni, we need to be filled with “everlasting love” (Moroni 8:17) or “charity,” particularly in a world of declining faith, when sometimes it seems things are falling down around

us and others are losing their “love.” This “love” motivated God the Father to send us his Son (1 Nephi 11:17, 22) and it motivated the Savior to lay down his life for us (2 Nephi 26:24). It will similarly motivate us to place on the altar whatever is necessary. To be a “Mormon” in the 21st century should mean, inasmuch as it is possible, to always be filled with “everlasting love,” “love [that] endureth” (Moroni 7:47; 8:26) or the “pure love of Christ” (7:47) and to “endure” in that love to the end. At that time, we will not only “be judged according to [our] works ... [but] the desires of our hearts” (Alma 41:3). Though iniquity abounds, our “love” as Latter-day Saints must not “wax cold” (Matthew 24:12; D&C 45:27; JS–M 1:10, 30).

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