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Was the Path Nephi Saw . . .

IN THE WORLD OF COPYISTS, especially those who copy what they hear, one of the most feared problems comes with words that sound the same. This challenge faced Joseph Smith’s scribes who wrote down the text of the Book of Mormon as he dictated it. For example, the words *son* and *sun* sound the same in English and are referred to as homophones (same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings). The identical pronunciation of these words, for instance, may lie behind the differing readings in 3 Nephi 25:2 and Malachi 4:2. As a further example, English speakers pronounce the terms *straight* and *strait* the same way. In fact, it is quite easy to find examples where educated speakers of English have confused the spellings as well, including in early 19th-century America. And here is the rub. The words *straight* and *strait* and their derivatives

sense. Used of a way, passage, or channel, it would mean “so narrow as to make transit difficult.” Used metaphorically of a commandment, law, penalty, or vow, it means “stringent” or “strict”—allowing no evasion.¹

The two Book of Mormon manuscripts (the original and printer’s manuscripts), as well as the 1830 edition, provide no help in interpreting whether a given word should be *straight* or *strait*. In the printer’s manuscript, both words were always spelled as *strait* (all 27 times), while in the 1830 edition, the typesetter spelled them all as *straight*. The original manuscript is extant for only 12 of the 27 occurrences. Only one of those (Alma 50:8) was spelled *straight*; the 11 others were spelled *strait*. We can see that the earliest textual sources provide no orthographic evidence for which spelling should be used. In preparing later editions, the

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bear very different meanings and, in one form or another, appear in no fewer than 27 passages in the Book of Mormon. But from the very first there has been some confusion over them.

The word *straight* comes from the Middle English *strehte* (the past participle of the modern verb *stretch*, thus its meaning “stretched”) and has consistently been used to mean “not crooked.” Something is straight if it is “free from curvature, bending, or angularity.” It is frequently used of a course or way to indicate movement “directly to or from a place” without deviation. Thus a straight course is the shortest way and is often assumed not to suffer from interruptions or intermediate destinations. On the other hand, the word *strait* comes from the Middle English *streit* and was adapted from the Old French *estreit* (and ultimately from the Latin *strictus*), denoting “narrow” or “tight,” particularly in the physical

editors noticed that neither Joseph’s scribes nor the printers were any more sensitive to the different spellings for these two homophones than were most of their contemporaries. As a consequence, we cannot appeal to spellings used in the original or the printer’s manuscripts or in the 1830 edition, but must rely instead on context and other internal evidences from the text to determine which word was meant in each case.

Two of the later changes back to *strait* are clearly justified by the context (1 Nephi 17:41, twice); six others follow biblical parallels in Isaiah and Matthew (1 Nephi 21:20; Isaiah 49:20; Jacob 6:11; 3 Nephi 14:13–14, twice; 3 Nephi 27:33, twice; Matthew 7:13–14). Over time, the spelling for these eight non-problematic occurrences was corrected to some form of *strait*—two in 1906, four in 1907, and two in 1920—but the story does not end there. In the most recent edition of the Book of Mormon, the phrase



strait path in six additional passages was changed back to *strait path* (three of these followed changes made in the 1953 RLDS edition, though perhaps unintentionally). The problem these occurrences raise is whether we can extrapolate from the “strait gate and narrow way” of the New Testament to the conclusion that Nephi’s “straight and narrow path” should read “strait and narrow.” The Book of Mormon often introduces distinctive phrasing that is not derived from the Bible, as in this case. Nephi’s richer image limits wandering missteps in *two* ways (both width and direction of the path), whereas the New Testament refers only to the constricted width of both gate and path, with no allusions to directional invariance. Did Nephi have one or both meanings in mind?²

The earlier eight changes to forms of *strait* are not difficult to justify contextually. Obviously, the

- I. The redundancy of *strait* and *narrow* as compound modifiers of the same noun cannot be defended by reference to any parallel in the Bible or the Book of Mormon. Rather, both Matthew and the Book of Mormon use *strait* singly to modify *gate* and *narrow* singly to describe the way in contrast to the other gate and way, which are “wide” and “broad,” respectively—employing traditional Hebrew parallel structure to emphasize the contrast *between* the two ways of living and the similarity *within* each of both its gate and its path.
- II. When Alma tells the people of Gideon to walk in the Lord’s paths, “which are straight” (Alma 7:9), we do not expect him to mean “narrow.” And when he comes back 10 verses later to this theme of “the paths of righteousness” (v. 19)

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Lord “straitened,” or disciplined, the Israelites in the wilderness (1 Nephi 17:41, twice). And clearly the Isaiah passage (1 Nephi 21:20) requires *strait* in the context that explains that the space is too confined (compare Isaiah 49:20). Just as obvious, the gate that opens on the path to eternal life is “strait”—that is, narrow—since repentance and baptism in the name of Christ is the only gate (Jacob 6:11; 3 Nephi 14:13–14, twice; 3 Nephi 27:33, twice). The narrow gate is contrasted with the wide gate that leads to hell. Further, it would be unusual to speak of a “straight gate.”

However, for the reasons listed below, we think the more recent revisions of six additional Book of Mormon passages (which describe the path as both “straight and narrow”) to read “strait and narrow” may lead readers to misread the intentions of the original Book of Mormon authors.

and commends the people for “making his [the Lord’s] paths straight,” it is made explicit and is emphasized that Alma means it in the sense of no variation of direction. For the Lord “*cannot walk in crooked paths; neither doth he vary from that which he hath said; neither hath he a shadow of turning from the right to the left*, or from that which is right to that which is wrong; therefore, his course is one eternal round” (v. 20). This usage seems to draw here and elsewhere on 2 Nephi 31:9, 18. It also has numerous biblical parallels (e.g., Psalm 5:8; Isaiah 40:3, 4; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23)—all of which emphasize the straightness of the Lord’s path in the directional sense (“the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord”) and provide the source and context for 1 Nephi 10:8, which in turn provides the context

for 2 Nephi 31, as it retells in greater detail Nephi's vision of John the Baptist and the baptism of Christ.

- III. Later, while blessing and instructing his son Helaman, Alma develops the idea that God's paths are straight in the directional sense (Alma 37:44) by comparing "a straight course to eternal bliss," delineated by the words of Christ, with "a straight course to the promised land," indicated to their ancestors by the divinely provided compass. Mormon echoes this usage in Helaman 3:29 when he testifies that the word of God will "lead the man of Christ in a straight and narrow course." The required spelling when modifying *course* is always *straight*.
- IV. Now we come to the "straight and narrow path" of Lehi's vision (1 Nephi 8:20). Given the similarity here to Mormon's usage just cited, we would naturally suppose the directional sense is intended. It is Jacob who most effectively comes to our rescue in articulating the meaning of his family's way of talking about a path that is both narrow and straight and that leads from a gate that is also constricted: "the way for man is narrow, but it lieth in a straight course before him" (2 Nephi 9:41). Notice how the choice of the conjunction *but* makes it impossible that Jacob intended the meaning of "strait" or "narrow" for the course or path. It would make no sense to say that "the way or path is narrow, but it is narrow"—that is, strait! Again, we have clear evidence that when a way or path or course is being described, Lehi and his family are thinking of it as minimally straight in a directional sense, even though it is sometimes also narrow. The gate, too, is narrow (or strait) in that it consists alone of the Holy One of Israel and there is no other gate.
- V. John Tvedtnes has recently provided another strong reason supporting this conclusion.³ He demonstrates convincingly that 2 Nephi 4 should be read as a reflection on the great visions given to Lehi and Nephi, because of the repeated specific references it makes to the content and phrasing of those visions. Here Nephi implores the Lord to "make my path straight before me" (2 Nephi 4:33), in apparent reference to the straight and narrow path of the vision (1 Nephi 8:20). In the same vision, John the Baptist was described as crying to the people to prepare "the way of the Lord" and to "make his paths straight"

(1 Nephi 10:8). On both counts the narrow path is also straight.


- VI. Three of the more recent changes are in 2 Nephi 31. This late chapter begins with Nephi explicitly referring the reader back to his vision of the baptism of Christ: "Wherefore, I would that ye should remember that I have spoken unto you concerning that prophet which the Lord showed unto me, that should baptize the Lamb of God, which should take away the sins of the world" (v. 4). Nephi summarized that part of his vision quickly (1 Nephi 11:27–28) after having earlier given a longer account of this part of his father's vision with the additional clarification that "much spake my father concerning this thing" (1 Nephi 10:8). In his summary of Lehi's account, Nephi included the same reference to Isaiah's prophecy of this event that John himself had used as an explanation for his ministry (see John 1:23): "And he spake also concerning a prophet who should come before the Messiah, to prepare the way of the Lord—Yea, even he should go forth and cry in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight" (1 Nephi 10:7–8; compare Isaiah 40:3). Given that Nephi explicitly invokes this context in 2 Nephi 31:4, it seems we would need a strong and clear reason to ignore that governing context when Nephi begins discussing the "straightness of the path" in verse 9 and the "straight and narrow path" in verses 18 and 19. And again, the text itself helps us to clarify Nephi's meaning.

With these observations in hand, we can make one final point about these three recent changes in 2 Nephi 31. Given the evidence above that Nephi and others all saw the path to eternal life as straight in the directional sense, it seems doubtful that Nephi would omit that important information in favor of a redundancy such as "strait and narrow." It is easy to see how the confusion arose. Clearly, it was correct to change references to the gate to "strait." And the path is always narrow, and therefore could also be called "strait." But to change Nephi's unique references to a path that is both straight and narrow is to wash out important information about that path that is clear in Nephi's source texts and is picked up by Jacob, Alma, and Mormon in many passages—always to be used in the directional sense. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Nephi's reference in verse 9 to the "straightness" of the path and the "narrowness" of

the gate. Again, it is the straightness of the path that Nephi wishes to emphasize. Interpreting “strait and narrow” as an intended pleonasm discounts the richer connections made by these later Book of Mormon authors, who knew Nephi’s language and culture much better than we do.

In his final words, Nephi gives us one more version of this problem. This time Nephi calls on the Gentiles to “enter into the narrow gate” and to “walk in the straight path” that leads to eternal life (2 Nephi 33:9). Literary consistency leads us to always see courses and paths as straight, even though this one may also be narrow in the sense spelled out by Jacob (2 Nephi 9:41), as demonstrated above.

In summary, a complete analysis of the full range of usage patterns for all forms of *strait* and *straight* in the Book of Mormon provides sufficient contextual evidence for resolving the orthographi-

cal problems that were introduced through these homophones in the manuscripts and the 1830 edition. The following chart lists all 27 occurrences of some form of *straight* in the 1830 edition, indicating which ones were changed to *strait* and in which LDS editions they were revised. The evidence, we believe, indicates that most of these later changes were correct. But because the Book of Mormon usage introduced by Nephi was distinctive, and not derived from the New Testament, editorial efforts to make the text more consistent with a perceived biblical parallel may have led to some problematic spellings. These are marked with asterisks in the following list. 

Reference	Text (corrected)	Original Ms.	Printer’s Ms.	1830	Current LDS text (since . . .)
1 Nephi 8:20	a straight and narrow path	Strait	strait	straight	* strait (1981)
1 Nephi 10:8	make his paths straight	strait	strait	straight	straight (1830)
1 Nephi 16:23	a straight stick	strait	strait	straight	straight (1830)
1 Nephi 17:41	he did straiten them	straiten	straiten	straighten	straiten (1907)
1 Nephi 17:41	the Lord straitened them	straitened	straitened	straightened	straitened (1907)
1 Nephi 21:20	the place is too strait	strait	strait	straight	strait (1920)
2 Nephi 4:33	make my path straight	strait	strait	straight	straight (1830)
2 Nephi 9:41	in a straight course	---	strait	straight	straight (1830)
2 Nephi 31:9	the straightness of the path	---	straitness	straightness	* straitness (1981)
2 Nephi 31:18	this straight and narrow path	---	strait	straight	* strait (1981)
2 Nephi 31:19	this straight and narrow path	---	strait	straight	* strait (1981)
2 Nephi 33:9	in the straight path	---	strait	straight	* strait (1981)
Jacob 6:11	at the strait gate	strait	strait	straight	strait (1920)
Alma 7:9	his paths which are straight	---	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Alma 7:19	making his paths straight	---	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Alma 14:28	they straightway came forth	---	straitway	straightway	straightway (1830)
Alma 14:28	they straightway came forth	---	straitway	straightway	straightway (1830)
Alma 37:12	his paths are straight	strait	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Alma 37:44	a straight course	strait	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Alma 37:44	a straight course	---	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Alma 50:8	in a straight course	straight	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Alma 56:37	in a straight course	strait	strait	straight	straight (1830)
Helaman 3:29	in a straight and narrow course	---	strait	straight	* strait (1981)
3 Nephi 14:13	at the strait gate	---	strait	straight	strait (1907)
3 Nephi 14:14	strait is the gate	---	strait	straight	strait (1907)
3 Nephi 27:33	at the strait gate	---	strait	straight	strait (1906)
3 Nephi 27:33	strait is the gate	---	strait	straight	strait (1906)