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The Language of Repentance in the Book of Mormon

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The English words *repent/repentance* may provide one of the clearest examples of how the English translation of the Book of Mormon can insulate modern readers from the precise meanings of important terms as they would have been understood by the Nephite prophets.¹ Shaped by centuries of Christian usage, the modern English term evokes subjective feelings of penitence, regret or sorrow for misdeeds, and desires or intentions for moral reformation. Our references to repentance can usually be equated with expressions of remorse, confession of sins, efforts at restitution, performance of penance, or conversion to a religion or a moral way of life. So it may come as a shock to modern readers to learn that the Book of Mormon prophets likely would not have been thinking primarily in terms of any of these attitudes or actions when they spoke of repentance. Rather, they were referring to God's invitation to all men and women to make or renew a covenant with him to keep his commandments.

Readers may also be surprised to learn that biblical scholarship has largely

¹ In a previous paper I have shown similarly that the common understanding that through baptism God washes away sins contradicts the consistent Book of Mormon teaching that baptism provides men with the means by which they can witness to the Father that they have repented with a covenant to take the name of Christ upon themselves, to keep his commandments, and to remember him always. See "Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon," *BYUS*, xxx.

ignored repentance as a topic for over half a century and that during this period studies in biblical theology “have typically given the theme only passing mention.”² By contrast, the Book of Mormon dictum to “preach nothing save it were repentance and faith on the Lord” seems to have guided the writings of Book of Mormon prophets from the beginning to the end.³ Different forms of the word occur 362 times in this text compared with the 162 occurrences in the entire King James Bible. This count does not consider other synonyms that occur in both texts and that will be examined below. But it does clearly identify repentance as a salient focus of Book of Mormon teaching. In this paper I will attempt a systematic examination of the language related to this prominent element of Nephite preaching.

In previous publications I have identified repentance as one of the six essential elements of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is presented in the Book of

² See the article and bibliography Mark J. Boda provides in “Repentance,” s.v., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (editors), IVP Academic, 2012, 664–671. Two recent systematic monographs on the topic are Mark J. Boda, *‘Return to Me’: A Biblical Theology of Repentance*, Intervarsity Press, 2015, and David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical*, Oxford University Press, 2016. See my review essay on these new monographs: “Two New Studies of Biblical Repentance,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 27 (2017), 57-62.

³ See the instructions of Alma to newly ordained priests in Mosiah 18:20.

Mormon.⁴ Abbreviated and full statements of this six-part gospel tend to lead with or emphasize the requirement of repentance.⁵ In 1996 I published a more detailed examination of the ways in which repentance is understood and taught in the Book of Mormon.⁶ In this new essay I will offer an exposition of the rich and complex family of terms used in repentance discourse in the Book of Mormon that reveals both connections to and differences from corresponding discourse in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, while it deeply enriches the Book of Mormon's version of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Repentance in the Old Testament

We should begin by noting the dependence of Nephite prophets on concepts of repentance that prevailed in the Old Testament prophetic writings. They repeatedly speak of repentance as turning or returning to God—to walk with him in his way, in the path of righteousness. This explains why the gospel or doctrine of Christ is referred to even more often in Book of Mormon discourse as the path

⁴ See “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets, *BYU Studies*, 31 (No. 3, Summer 1991): 31–50., “The Gospel of Jesus Christ,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, New York: Macmillan, 1992, 2:556–560, and more recently, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 68 (2:2015): 218–234.

⁵ See “Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Spring, 2017.

⁶ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 5 (2), 1996, pp. 33–42.

or the way.⁷ And it helps us understand why the Book of Mormon prophets relied so frequently on the ancient doctrine of the two ways in their preaching.⁸ They clearly saw that there was “none other way” than the gospel of Jesus Christ as “the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” through which people could escape the captivity of Satan who strives to lead all into the ways of wickedness.⁹

Much of the confusion may stem from the decision of early translators of the Old Testament into English who chose to link the Hebrew word *nackam* to the English words *repent* and *repentance*. While *nackam* connotes sorrow or regret—much like modern Christian notions of repentance—Bible scholars today are in agreement that the Hebrew root *shuv* (to turn or return) is the dominant Old Testament term for *repentance/repent* in covenantal contexts. Jacob Milgrom has shown that this usage does not emerge in the Hebrew text until the eighth century in the writings of the prophets—beginning with Amos and peaking in Jeremiah

⁷ In “This is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14 (No. 3, 2013): 75-76, I noted that while the Book of Mormon uses the terms *gospel* and *doctrine* 67 times to refer to Christ’s teachings, the language of ways, paths, or roads is used 108 times.

⁸ Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49–78, shows that the Nephite prophets used the same version of that doctrine as did the Old Testament prophets, and that they used it more frequently and with much richer explanations than what is provided in the Bible.

⁹ 2 Nephi 31:21.

and Ezekiel. The only four occurrences of the term before that are negative and refer to apostasy or turning away from God and his ways.¹⁰ The earlier texts that scholars refer to as the Priestly document sometimes speak in terms of remorse “*asham*” and confession “*hitvaddah*.” While different in formulation, the prophetic concept retains the central teaching that “man’s repentance is a prerequisite for divine forgiveness.”¹¹ In his 2001 study, George Ossom-Batsa concluded that *shuv* in Jeremiah “expresses YHWH’s call to Israel to repent and receive forgiveness and blessings. Furthermore, YHWH’s actual forgiveness of Israel is manifested only when Israel confesses her sin and becomes committed to living a new covenantal relationship. Finally, YHWH’s potential forgiveness is always available to sinners who confess their sins.”¹²

Milgrom emphasizes that repentance must come from the heart. “Man must humble himself, acknowledge his wrong, and resolve to depart from sin. . . . If the heart is not involved, the rituals of penitence, such as weeping, fasting, rending clothes, and donning sackcloth and ashes, are unqualifiedly condemned by the

¹⁰ Jacob Milgrom, “The Priestly Doctrine of Repentance,” *Revue Biblique* 82 (1975), 186–205 at 202-203.

¹¹ Milgrom, 204.

¹² George Ossom-Batsa, “The Theological Significance of the Root *šwb* in Jeremiah,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, August 2001, Vol. 39, No. 2, 232.

prophets.”¹³ Milgrom goes on to describe the prophetic concept of repentance:

At the same time, inner contrition must be followed by outward acts; remorse must be translated into deeds. Two substages are involved in this process: first, the negative one of ceasing to do evil (Isaiah 33:15; Psalms 15), and then the positive, active step of doing good (Isaiah 1:17; Jer. 26:13; Amos 5:14–15). Again the language used to describe man’s active role in the process testifies to its centrality: incline the heart to the Lord (Josh. 24:23); make oneself a new heart (Ezek. 18:31); circumcise the heart (Jer. 34:4); wash the heart (Jer. 4:14); and break one’s fallow ground (Hos. 10:12). However, all these expressions are subsumed and encapsulated by one verb, which dominates the penitential literature of the bible, *shuv*, “turn/return.” This root combines in itself both requisites of repentance: to turn from evil and to turn to good. The motion of turning implies that sin is not an eradicable stain but a straying from the right path and that by the effort of turning, a power God has given all men, the sinner can redirect his destiny.¹⁴

Milgrom’s long-standing focus on *shuv* as the principal Hebrew term for

¹³ Jacob Milgrom, “Excursus: Repentance in the Torah and the Prophets,” *Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary*, Vol. 4 *Numbers* (1990), 396–397. This later treatment is not much changed from his entry in the 1962 Supplementary Volume to *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, “Repentance in the OT,” 736–738, which is more widely available.

¹⁴ Milgrom, “Excursus,” 397.

repentance is strongly confirmed in David A. Lambert's study of the evolution of the concept in biblical religions. Lambert recognizes that these other Hebrew terms have been suggested as repentance synonyms by scholars, but concludes that none of these, apparently, have the number of attestations or the suggestiveness to stand as the appointed articulation of "repentance" in the Hebrew Bible. That honor has been reserved for a peculiar phrase, "return [*shuv*] to YHWH," whose range proves far more impressive, from the early, eighth-century prophets, to Jeremiah, to the deuteronomistic writings, and on to a variety of postexilic texts. Here, we have an ancient Hebrew lexical item—what's more, an utterance of prophets—that could be seen as voicing, indeed, as giving birth to, the idea of "repentance."¹⁵

Lambert helpfully points out that the etymology of *shuv* terms derives originally from a verb of motion that signals a turning or change of direction. Whether that direction is toward or away from any particular reference point must be clarified through context or additional detail. But the term does indicate radical change of direction. Further, Lambert goes on to argue that as a verb of motion, it does not assume a covenantal penitential context. Rather, he finds the first evolution of the term in that direction in oracular contexts where Israel is accused

¹⁵ Lambert, 71.

of turning to other gods or to strong nations in its times of need, when YHWH wants Israel to *put its trust* in him. Turning to YHWH would require shunning other oracles or powerful nations, trusting that YHWH could fight their battles, and listening to the guidance provided by his prophets.

By inquiring of God in his place or through his human representative, the supplicant pays homage and demonstrates dependence: whatever ensues, whether for good or for bad, is marked as the work of the deity. Failure to consult YHWH could suggest his impotence or irrelevance and force the deity to find another way to assert supremacy.¹⁶

While Lambert finds the earliest prophets Amos and Hosea using *shuv* in this oracular context of appealing for help, it is in Isaiah that the issue of putting trust in a god or a political power comes to the fore. Here “turning” isn’t just an issue of inquiring or appealing. Rather it suggests a policy of relying on a particular source of help or strength. This is clear in the language of Isaiah 31:1: “Ha! Those who go down to Egypt for help, who *lean* [i.e. rely] on horses! They have *put their trust* in abundance of chariots, in vast numbers of riders, and they have not *looked* to the Holy One of Israel, they have not *sought* the Lord.” Lambert argues that each of the italicized terms in this passage is *shuv* related and

¹⁶ Lambert, 77

that Isaiah's concern focuses on "the question of dependence, that they should turn to their God rather than relying on other locales of power."¹⁷

Continuing his analysis of the evolution of meanings for *shuv* into the sixth century, Lambert identifies in Jeremiah the complete abandonment of the oracular language of appeal in a shift to two new meanings: 1) rapprochement or renewal of a previously existing (familial) relationship (e.g., Jeremiah 3:6–7, 12), and 2) the cessation of sin. "It is impossible to find the *shuv* of cessation of sin before Jeremiah, and nearly impossible to find anything but it after him."¹⁸ But Lambert strongly resists the conclusion that *shuv* has acquired other key elements of later conceptions of repentance. He does not yet see implications for the kind of interior feelings and choices that define the New Testament and modern conceptions. While this study of repentance in the Book of Mormon will not need to consider the full evolution of the concept beyond the early sixth century BCE, it may be helpful to point out that Lambert goes on to conclude that modern

discourse around repentance was a product of the Hellenistic period; it began within moral philosophy, as a technique for the progress of the sage, and was taken up around the turn of the Common Era, within emerging

¹⁷ Lambert, 82.

¹⁸ Lambert, 86.

forms of Judaism and Christianity, as a practice of subjective control for shaping communal discipline and defining communal boundaries.¹⁹

It is not difficult to find echoes of Lambert's "*shuv* of appeal" in the Book of Mormon. While Nephi never quotes Isaiah 31:1, he twice dramatically rejects the practice of appealing to human strengths for protection or support.

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh, for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm. Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh; yea, my God will give me if I ask not amiss. Therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee, yea, I will cry unto thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness. Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God. (2 Ne 4:34–35)

Nephi later quotes the Lord God as the source of this phrasing and explicitly connects the call to repentance to man's misplacement of trust in the arm of flesh or human wisdom:

Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm, or that maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men, save their

¹⁹ Lambert, 9.

precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost. Woe be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts; for notwithstanding I shall lengthen out mine arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me. Nevertheless I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will *repent* and come unto me. For mine arm is lengthened out all the day long, saith the Lord God of Hosts. (2 Nephi 28:31–32)

The integral connection of faith or trust in the Lord and repentance is quite clear in these passages.²⁰ It is only by relying on or trusting in the arm of the Lord and his strength that men can turn to him. Faith is the essential prerequisite for repentance. Without that basic trust, hearkening to God makes no sense and cannot last. Jacob explains that salvation can only come to those who repent “having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 9:23). Benjamin twice links “repentance and faith” as essential for any person to be saved (Mosiah 3: 12, 21). Both Almas assumed the same tight connection between faith and repentance,²¹ and Alma the Younger explained that the atonement of Christ will “bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name” as it brings them the “means . . . that they may have *faith unto repentance*” (Alma 34:15). In his four-

²⁰ Cf. 2 Chronicles 32:8 and Jeremiah 17:5.

²¹ See Mosiah 18:7, 20, 25:15, 22, and Alma 9:27: 12:30, 13:10, 22:14, 16, and 37:33. Cf. Helaman 13:6

fold repetition of this unique phrase he dramatizes the fact that true faith leads immediately to repentance, almost as if they were two sides of the same coin.

And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice and encircle them in the arms of safety, while he that exerciseth no *faith unto repentance* is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice. Therefore only unto him that hath *faith unto repentance* is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren, that ye might begin to exercise your *faith unto repentance*. . . . And therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you. (Alma 34: 16–17, 31)

The Lamanite prophet Samuel extends this phrasing to include “the holy scriptures . . . which leadeth them to faith on the Lord and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them” (Helaman 15:7). Centuries later, Moroni seems to draw on the same language to describe the preaching of the Jaredite prophet Ether as “exhorting the people to believe in God unto repentance” (Ether 12:3).

Repentance in the New Testament

During the period in which our New Testament was written, a major shift occurred in the language of repentance among early Christians. The gospels, and

particularly Mark and Matthew, display a continuing reliance on the Jewish understanding of repentance as a turning from the ways of sin to God. For Christians, this turning was seen as conversion, and the Greek word *epistrepho*, which signaled a change in religious or philosophical loyalty, was employed to express what the Hebrew *shuv* conveyed in Old Testament writing. But the English word *repent*, *repentance* usually refers to remorse or regret, and has been used to translate the Greek terms *metanoeo* and *metanoia*, which refer to a change of mind, usually in the context of regretting previous choices or thoughts. By the New Testament period, these two Greek terms had become synonymous in the writing of Hellenistic Jews. Luke uses both terms in *Acts*, paving the way for the later Christian equations of repentance with acts of penance that would display remorse or sorrow. “Within the [New Testament] itself repentance began to shift from a radical turning to God in face of the end time to a remorse over one’s pagan ways and an adoption of the Christian gospel.”²²

Repentance in the Book of Mormon

The opening scene of the Book of Mormon portrays the first year of the

²² See S. B. Parker, “Repentance in the NT,” s.v., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, 1962, 738–739, for a more complete account.

reign of King Zedekiah as a time when “there came many prophets prophesying unto the people that they must repent or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Touched by their message, Lehi “prayed unto the Lord, . . . with all his heart, in behalf of his people” (1 Nephi 1:5). The overwhelming response from the Lord came in a series of visions and revelation, which included the future coming of the Messiah and the immediate destruction of Jerusalem. With this preparation, Lehi also “went forth among the people and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard” (1 Nephi 1:18). Like the other prophets, he was mocked and threatened with death, and was subsequently led with his family and others to flee Jerusalem and travel to a previously unknown land. A decade later, the aging prophet is found in his new promised land, teaching the gospel to his people and urging them to be faithful to the Lord who had brought them there.

The central role of repentance in God’s plan of salvation for men was stated clearly by Lehi. After explaining God’s purposes in creating this world and our first parents, as well as the devil’s fall from heaven and leading of them into transgression, Lehi taught that “the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh.” Mankind is therefore found in “a state of probation.” And from the beginning, “the Lord

God . . . gave commandment that all men must repent.” But because the Messiah would “redeem the children of men from the fall,” “they have become free forever,” and “are free to chose liberty and eternal life through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death according to the captivity and power of the devil.”²³

This central role of repentance was emphasized to Lehi and Nephi in the great vision they received at the first camp in the wilderness, where they were taught the gospel or doctrine of Christ by the Father and the Son.²⁴ At the end of his writings, Nephi finally shares that doctrine with his readers, leading with a discussion of repentance and baptism. He quotes the Father saying “repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son” (2 Ne 31:11). Nephi goes on spell out the requirements of sincere repentance—that one “follow the Son with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God but with real intent, repenting of your sins” (2 Ne 31:13). Nephi then explains to his readers that through baptism repentant persons witness to the Father “that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ” and “to keep (his) commandments” (2 Ne 31:13, 14). So “the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism

²³ 2 Nephi 2:21–27.

²⁴ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel according to Nephi,” *Religious Educator* 16 (no. 2, 2015), 51–75.

by water, and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne 31:17). Through repentance and baptism, the person has entered on the “straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life.” But not all is done, for eternal life will only come to those who continue on that path and “endure to the end” with “steadfastness in Christ,” and “a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men” (2 Nephi 31:18, 20).

The basic theological insights we gain from these early passages are echoed throughout the Book of Mormon. God has a plan for the salvation of all mankind, his children on this earth. He created this probationary estate knowing that it would confront every person with the necessity of choosing the path they would follow, the ways of evil, or the one true path that leads to eternal life. That plan includes the gospel of Jesus Christ, an escape provided through the atonement of Christ, that teaches mankind what each person must do to be saved. While repentance is only one of the six elements of that gospel, it is the key element that describes the choice each person must make—to abandon their own chosen ways and take up the true path laid out in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of this, many of these passages that name repentance as the key to man’s salvation from evil implicitly refer to all the other elements of the gospel: (1) trust or faith in Jesus Christ, (2) *baptism in water* as a witness of the covenant made at the time of

repentance, (3) the *baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost* which brings the remission of sins and provides the essential guide each person must follow to stay on the true path, and (4) *enduring to the end* as a description of the life of obedience through which the Lord can shape and sanctify each of his followers, that they may become like him and be prepared to enter his presence.²⁵

Jacob, Nephi's younger brother and successor as prophet, does not claim further revelation on this topic beyond that received by his father and older brother, but his explanations to his people do provide some enriched understanding. Jacob elaborates first on the background for God's command to "all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Ne 9:23). For "if they will not repent and believe in his name, and endure to the end, they must be damned" (2 Ne 9:24). Because of the fall, all men are in "the grasp of this awful monster," even "death and hell," the deaths of the body and the spirit. But out of his great goodness, God has prepared "a way for their escape through the atonement performed by the Holy One of Israel that satisfies the demands of justice and makes it possible for all to be "delivered from that awful monster, death and hell, and the devil, and the lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless

²⁵ See Reynolds, "The Gospel according to Mormon."

torment” (2 Ne 9:10, 25–26). And so God has provided an escape for all who will hearken to him. But there will be a judgment, and “woe unto all they that die in their sins; for they shall return to God and behold his face and remain in their sins” (2 Ne 9:38). Moving to a conclusion, Jacob pleads with his brethren to “come unto the Lord” and to “remember that his paths are righteousness. Behold, the way for man is narrow, but it lieth in a straight course before him, and the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; . . . and there is none other way” (2 Ne 9:41). He urges them to remember God and the great things he has done for them—to “lay aside” their sins and “not hang down” their heads. Rather, he encourages them to “cheer up (their) hearts” and remember that they “are free to act for (themselves)—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life . . . to reconcile [themselves] to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh” (2 Ne 10:20–24).

These three founding prophets of the Nephite dispensation understood this world as a probationary state in which men and women are given their freedom to choose between two paths as they choose to hearken either to the voice of God, who has provided the way to eternal life, or to the enticements of the devil, who will lead his followers into misery and hell. The dominant metaphor that surfaces repeatedly in their teachings is the characterization of the gospel of Jesus Christ as

the way—emphatically the only way—that leads to human joy and salvation. And the choice men must make if they will pursue that path is to humble themselves before God, to covenant in complete sincerity to follow him and his commandments, and to be baptized in water as a witness to the Father of this covenant. Having entered through this gate into the straight and narrow path, they must continue faithful, enduring to the end, if they would receive eternal life.

Repentance, then, is a choice to leave one's own path and to follow the one path provided by the Father and the Son. In these presentations, there is no talk of penance, compensation, or punishment. Though repentance is usually characterized as a turning or turning back from wrong paths to the correct one, the emphasis on every man's freedom to choose the way he will go could also portray repentance as a change of mind in consonance with later New Testament language. The emphasis on turning away from or to one path or the other in the Nephite teachings on repentance explains why the Book of Mormon invokes the ancient teaching of the two ways so much more frequently and more richly explained than does the Bible or other ancient texts.²⁶

Another striking feature of repentance paranesis in the Book of Mormon is the continual jumping back and forth between the need for individuals to repent if

²⁶ See Reynolds, "Ancient Doctrine."

they would receive eternal life and the prophecies of a future apostasy and destruction in the Nephite civilization, which would finally be overcome in the last days when the remnant of Lehi's posterity would choose to follow Christ and receive the blessings promised to Abraham, and specifically to Joseph, as a people. These corporate prophecies of a future repentant Israel are emphasized in the writings of these first three prophets and of the last two, who abridged the final work of the Book of Mormon. It is also worth pointing out that the teachings of Christ in his post-resurrection visit to the Nephites emphasized the same thing. In his first day of teaching the Nephites, Christ taught them the gospel and what they must do individually to qualify for eternal life. On the second day he focused on the future reclamation of Israel through a restoration of the gospel first to the Gentiles, and through them to the descendants of Lehi and to all the house of Israel. As in the prophecies of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, Isaiah, Mormon, and Moroni, Jesus also indicated that the Book of Mormon containing these prophecies would be the principal agent in convincing those future recipients of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁷ But for both corporate Israel and for individuals, the concept of repentance is the same. As Nephi concludes his review of these

²⁷ See Noel B. Reynolds "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," working paper available online at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1817>.

prophecies and prepares to present the gospel of Christ in his final sermon he makes this clear:

For behold, I say unto you: As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 30:2)

Repentance in Book of Mormon Phraseology

The earlier discussion of the link between faith and repentance in Book of Mormon discourse also suggests the possibility of distinctive rhetorical structures that may provide additional insight on how the Nephi prophets understood repentance. Alma's distinctive phrase, *faith unto repentance*, occurs four times in chapter 34, but nowhere else in all of scripture. Alma and other prophets employ a different, but closely related rhetorical structure to make the same point about belief in Christ leading to repentance. While almost a dozen passages closely link repentance and belief in Christ, five of these seem to fit the classical rhetorical form of *hendiadys*. In his classic study of biblical figures of speech, Bullinger observed that this figure is "very frequently used in both the Old and New

Testaments,” and that it “is one of the most important in the Bible.”²⁸ Almost a century later, in his widely acclaimed updating of Bullinger’s Greek and Latin-oriented work to a Hebrew perspective, Watson maintained the same view, and even cited another scholar’s claim that “hendiadys is in more frequent use in biblical Hebrew than in any other language.”²⁹ While this figure has not been so widely used in English literature, George Wright argues that it was a favorite for Shakespeare who exploited its uncertainties and rich meaning possibilities—using it over 300 times in his plays and 66 times where it becomes thematic in *Hamlet*.³⁰

Because rhetorical forms are not widely taught these days, hendiadys may not be widely recognized or understood by contemporary readers. In its most common form, two nouns or verbs of the same case or tense are conjoined by *and* to signal a deeper unity of meaning that is emphasized by their conjunction. A relevant example from the Old Testament occurs in the repeated conjunction of *hesed* (mercy, covenant love, or grace) with *emet* (truth). The point of the

²⁸ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House), 657, published originally in London in 1898.

²⁹ See the examples and explanations offered in Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, JSOT Press, 1986, 324–332, and especially 325, where he cites Meir Weiss, “The Pattern of Numerical Sequence in Amos 1-2: A Re-Examination,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (no. 4, 1967), 421.

³⁰ George T. Wright, “Hendiadys and *Hamlet*,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 96, No. 2 (March, 1981), 168–193.

combined phrase is that God’s love is dependable because he embodies truth and is unchanging.³¹ So while the two words do have their own independent meanings and usage, their conjunction points to and emphasizes an additional range of shared meaning.³²

1. *Repent and believe in me*

The close connection between belief (faith) and repentance is clearly signaled in several non-hendiadys phrases: “If thou repent of all they sins . . . and call on his name in faith, believing . . . then shalt thou receive” (Alma 22:16), and “If ye believe on his name, ye will repent of all your sins” (Helaman 14:13). But six passages seem to make the same connection with “repent and believe” used as a hendiadys:

1. “If they will not *repent and believe* in his name . . .” (2 Nephi 9:24).

³¹ See the explanation in Lester J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth,” *Reformed Review* 16 (no. 1, 1962), 4.

³² While many of the ways that scholars have applied the concept of *hendiadys* from classical rhetoric to studies of the Hebrew Bible have been severely criticized in a recent dissertation, the linguistic phenomenon that I find in the Book of Mormon matches well with what this dissertation recognizes as genuine in the HB. See Rosmari Lillas, “Hendiadys in the Hebrew Bible: An Investigation of the Applications of the Term,” University of Gothenburg, 2012. While Lillas does find the recurring examples of conjoined nouns where the pairing requires reinterpretation of one or both nouns to be a genuine and even frequent phenomenon in HB direct discourse, she is not comfortable using the classical rhetorical term *hendiadys* for a label because of other systematic differences in the base languages and because of widespread overuse of the term by some Bible scholars.. Notwithstanding those misgivings, I will use the term here with these clarifications and leave the labeling problem to the hebraists.

2. “The Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that *repent and believe* in his Son” (2 Nephi 30:2).
3. “His arm is extended to all people who will *repent and believe* on his name” (Alma 19:36).
4. “Even unto salvation to those who will *repent and believe* on his name” (Alma 26:35).
5. “The Father commandeth all men everywhere *to repent and believe* in me” (3 Nephi 11:32).
6. “I have given unto you the law and the commandments of my Father, *that ye shall believe* in me *and that ye shall repent* of your sins” (3 Nephi 12:19).

The first five of these examples appear to meet the standard description of hendiadys completely, and they are essentially identical to one another. I have listed the sixth one as well because it is obviously derived from and intended as a repetition of the fifth one. Though the phrasing is extended and the order of the two key terms is reversed, the meaning is clearly the same, the verb forms are identical, and they are conjoined with “and.” It should also be noted that there are at least three other passages in which faith or belief and repentance occur in similar sentences, but mixed with other elements of the gospel such as baptism or

enduring to the end.³³ In these cases, they constitute elements of gospel merisms, another important biblical figure of speech that is used hundreds of times in the Book of Mormon as an abbreviated statement of the full six-part gospel formula.³⁴ Three of the clear-cut hendiadys in the foregoing list are also parts of longer meristic statements of the gospel—giving us examples of figures of speech embedded in larger figures of speech.

While the concurrence of *repent/repentance* and *faith/belief* in the same meristic reference to the gospel only tells us that they are both on the list of key elements of the gospel message, their conjoining in hendiadys teaches us to look for some shared meaning of the terms. The earlier discussion of “faith unto repentance” showed us an obvious shared meaning. The Nephites understood the repentance required by this gospel of Jesus Christ to be the natural outcome of belief in him. That faith or belief was the only suitable and sufficient motivator for the repentance required.

The occurrence of this hendiadys as part of the recurring discourse on the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon suggests that there may be other

³³ Cf. 2 Nephi 9:23, Ether 4:18, and Moroni 7:34.

³⁴ See Reynolds, “Biblical Merismus.”

similar examples—which turns out to be the case.³⁵ Even more arresting is the discovery that *belief* is not the only term that the Nephite prophets harnessed with *repentance* using this figure of speech. The following analyses of recurring repentance-based hendiadys reveal an unexpected richness and complexity in the Nephite concept of repentance that appears to include, but also to go far beyond what we find in the Old Testament. Most significant are the linkages between repentance and baptism, coming to the Lord, and returning to his path. But several other less frequently used examples promise even further enrichment of this Nephite concept.

2. *Repent and be baptized*

Mormon’s historical report on the successes of Christian missionaries in the final years before the coming of Christ to the Nephites clearly articulates the Nephite understanding of the connection between repentance and the ordinance of baptism, which they saw as a witness to God and to the people that they had repented:³⁶

And Nephi did cry unto the people in the commencement of the thirty and

³⁵ 2 Nephi 9:24, 3 Nephi 11:32, and 3 Nephi 12:19.

³⁶ The Nephite understanding of baptism as a witness to God of repentance and not as a washing away of sins is documented at length in Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism.”

third year; and he did preach unto them repentance and remission of sins. Now I would have you to remember also that there were none which were brought unto repentance who were not baptized with water. Therefore there were ordained of Nephi men unto this ministry, that all such as should come unto them should be baptized with water—and this as a witness and a testimony before God and unto the people that they had repented and received a remission of their sins. And there were many in the commencement of this year that were baptized unto repentance. (3 Ne. 7:23–26)

Numerous passages in the Book of Mormon link repentance and baptism together, both as a matter of preaching and of Nephite practice—reflecting the same view expressed in the preceding quotation, that baptism is an essential consequence of true repentance. This connection is emphasized negatively in the story of Ammon’s lack of authority to baptize the repentant remnant of Limhi’s people, who had to defer that culminating piece of their repentance until they could reach Zarahemla, where they could be baptized by Alma, who had “authority from God” (Mosiah 21:33–34). While most of these passages linking repentance with baptism are formulated as gospel merisms, at least nine of them do appear to be expressed as hendiadys—thereby employing that same figure of speech to

incorporate one more essential element into the Nephite notion of repentance:

1. he commandeth all men that they must *repent and be baptized* in his name (2 Ne. 9:23)
2. the Father saith: Repent ye, *repent ye, and be baptized* in the name of my Beloved Son (2 Ne. 31:11)
3. which did cause them *to repent of their sins and to be baptized* unto the Lord their God (Alma 62:45)
4. Ye must *repent and be baptized* in my name (3 Ne. 11:38)
5. those *who repent and are baptized* in my name. (3 Ne. 18:11)
6. among my people *which do repent and are baptized* in my name. (3 Ne. 18:16)
7. Therefore *repent and be baptized* in the name of Jesus (Morm. 7:8)
8. this thing shall ye teach: *repentance and baptism* (Moro. 8:10)
9. teach parents that *they must repent and be baptized* (Moro. 8:10)

The connection between repentance and baptism emphasizes the covenantal nature of repentance itself. This is clearly the case in the story of Limhi and his people mentioned above:

Now they would have gladly joined with them, for they themselves had entered into *a covenant with God to serve him and keep his commandments.*

And now since the coming of Ammon, king Limhi had also entered into *a covenant with God, and also many of his people, to serve him and keep his commandments*. And it came to pass that king Limhi and many of his people was³⁷ desirous to be baptized, but there was none in the land that had authority from God. 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, which 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.* (Mosiah 21:31–35)

But the covenantal nature of repentance was also front and center in the original teachings of Nephi in which he gave first the example of the Lamb of God who “humbleth himself before the Father and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments” by being “baptized with water” (2 Ne. 31:7–8). That this “humbling” and “witnessing” refers to repentance and baptism when applied to Christ’s followers is made clear by

³⁷ While strange sounding to modern ears, scholars recognize the recurring use of singular verb forms with compound subjects in classical Hebrew texts. See, Lillas, p. xxx.

Nephi's conclusion: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God but with real intent, *repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ by baptism, yea, by following your Lord and Savior down into the water according to his word*" (2 Ne. 31:13). The same connection is reiterated in Alma's iconic baptizing of his first converts—after teaching them "*repentance and redemption and faith on the Lord*" (Mosiah 18:7): "Now I say unto you, . . . 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, (Mosiah 18:10).* These and other passages help readers to see that the repeated linking of repentance and baptism in simple hendiadys and in more complex passages derives from the Nephite understanding that repentance entailed a covenant to obey the commandments of God and to take upon oneself the name of Christ, and that baptism was the formal witnessing of that covenant.

3. *Repent and come unto me/him*

In the same initial teaching, Nephi had characterized repentance and baptism as "the gate by which ye should enter" into "this straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life" (2 Ne. 31:17–18). But as Nephi hastened to clarify,

this entrance is only a beginning, for all is not done. For the rest of one's life, the follower of Christ must then "press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men . . . and endure to the end" if they would receive eternal life and "be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Ne. 31:19–21). As I have explained elsewhere, it is to this life-long process of keeping the commandments and pressing forward in faith, hope, and charity that the Savior and the Nephite prophets refer to with the command or invitation to come unto him.³⁸ The Nephite idea of repentance includes this notion of entering into this path that leads to him and explains the numerous passages that link the invitations to repent and to come unto him, the following 16 of which are formulated as hendiadys.

1. The way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world if it so be that they *repent and come* unto him. (1 Ne. 10:18)
2. Nevertheless I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will *repent and come* unto me. (2 Ne. 28:32)
3. I beseech of you . . . that ye would *repent and come* with full purpose of heart. (Jacob 6:5)

³⁸ See, Noel B. Reynolds, "How 'Come Unto Me' Fits into the Nephite Gospel," *Religious Educator* 18 (No. 2, 2017), 15–29, and "'Come unto Me' as a Technical Gospel Term," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, forthcoming 2018.

4. I would declare unto every soul . . . that they should *repent and come* unto our God. (Alma 29:2)
5. Whoso *repenteth and cometh* unto me. . . . (3 Ne. 9:22)
6. Therefore *repent and come* unto me, ye ends of the earth. (3 Ne. 9:22)
7. Ye shall *repent . . . and come* unto me. (3 Ne. 12:19)
8. For ye know not but what they will . . . *repent and come* unto me. (3 Ne. 18:32)
9. that they may *repent and come* unto me. (3 Ne. 21:6)
10. whosoever will not *repent and come* unto my Beloved Son . . . (3 Ne. 21:20)
11. This is the commandment: *repent . . . and come* unto me. (3 Ne. 27:20)
12. *Repent . . . and come* unto me. (3 Ne. 30:2)
13. Cry unto this people: *Repent ye and come* unto me. (Morm. 3:2)
14. Therefore *repent . . . and come* unto me. (Ether 4:18)
15. That they *repent and come* unto the Father. (Ether 5:5)
16. *Repent . . . and come* unto me. (Moro. 7:34)

Twelve of these invitations to repent and come unto the Lord occur in

passages that report him speaking directly to a prophet or to assembled Nephites, and all the others occur in passages in which the prophets are conveying to others the invitational charge the Lord has give to them. The repeated conjunction of these two verbs exemplifies the pattern of hendiadys as described above perfectly in that the pairing evokes further meaning beyond which either verb would convey on its own. Coming unto him can no longer be interpreted as a vague invitation to draw closer to God. Rather, when paired with the idea of repentance as developed in the Book of Mormon it evokes the image of walking up a “straight and narrow path,” which is also characterized as keeping the commandments faithfully—as enduring faithfully to the end. Furthermore, this coming to the Lord must also be seen as grounded in the covenant made at the time the person repented. It is not simply a response to an invitation; it is a determined effort to fulfill a promise made to God and witnessed to him and to the world through the formal and public act of being baptized.

4. *Repent and turn/return unto the Lord*

The Old Testament features numerous passages containing a double imperative commanding repentance—literally “Repent! Repent.” Because the Hebrew word most often used in these passages is *shuv*, most translators follow the KJV in rendering these double imperatives as “repent and turn/return,” thereby

exploiting the root meaning of the term and expressing these phrases as hendiadys.³⁹ The same pattern recurs frequently in the Book of Mormon, suggesting the likelihood that *shuv* may be the underlying term used for repentance by the Nephite prophets. The clearest examples follow, beginning with Abinadi who is quoting the Lord:

O repent ye, repent ye!

Why will ye die?

Turn ye, turn ye unto the Lord your God!

Why hath he forsaken you? (Hel. 7:17)

Less poetic are another dozen examples that feature the structure of hendiadys:

1. except they *repent and turn* to the Lord their God, (Mosiah 11:21)
2. Except this people *repent and turn* to the Lord their God. (Mosiah 11:23)
3. Except they *repent . . . and turn* to me. (Alma 3:14)
4. perhaps they will *repent and turn* unto thee. (Hel. 11:4)
5. But if ye will *repent and return* unto the Lord your God. (Hel. 13:11)
6. will ye not now *return* unto me *and repent* of your sins. (3 Ne. 9:13)
7. if ye will *repent and return* unto me with full purpose of heart! (3

³⁹ See, e.g., Ezekiel 14:6 and 18:30.

Ne. 10:6)

8. if the Gentiles will *repent and return* unto me, saith the Father. (3

Ne. 16:13)

9. they will *return and repent*. (3 Ne. 18:32)

10. *Turn . . . and repent* of your evil doings. (3 Ne. 30:2)

11. except they should *repent and turn* unto the Lord. (Ether 11:1)

12. except ye shall *repent and turn* from your evil ways? (Morm. 5:22)

In light of the constant background presence of the doctrine of the two ways in the Book of Mormon, all these double invocations of *turn/return* point implicitly—and the last one points explicitly—to the idea that repentance entails a choosing of the Lord’s way to replace the ways of evil in which men find themselves. Repentance is a choice to stop following the devil and to begin following Christ, which can only be accomplished with God’s help, based on the covenant one makes to keep his commandments.

5. *Repent and humble yourselves*

Nephi began his principal exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ by pointing out that Jesus himself had shown the way “unto the children of men” by setting “the example before them.” He starts by asking why “the Lamb of God, he being holy, should have need to be baptized by water to fulfill all righteousness.”

The answer is that unlike us, he had no sins requiring repentance, but even so it was requisite that “he humbleth himself before the Father and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments”. So Jesus humbled himself before the Father by making a covenant “that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments” and witnessed this covenant “unto the Father” by being “baptized with water” (2 Nephi 31:5–9). To follow that example, Nephi taught his people that they must repent and be baptized, repentance being the version of humbling oneself before the Father that is required of those who have sinned and are not yet holy. He quotes the Father himself: “Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son” (2 Nephi 31:11).

This linkage of repentance and humbling oneself surfaces several times in another Book of Mormon hendiadys, which also may be synonymous with the injunction to repent and harden not one’s heart, which appears in parallel hendiadyses, as can be seen in these examples:

1. ye must *repent . . . and humble yourselves* before God (Mosiah 4:10)
2. whomsoever did belong to the church that did not *repent . . . and humble themselves* before God (Alma 6:3)
3. the people *had repented and did humble themselves* (Hel. 11:9)

4. Therefore *repent ye and humble yourselves* before him (Morm. 5:24)
5. that ye would *repent and . . . harden not your hearts*; (Jacob 6:5)
6. If ye will *repent and harden not your hearts* (Alma 12:33)
7. whosoever *repenteth and hardeneth not his heart* (Alma 12:34)
8. if ye *will repent and harden not your hearts* (Alma 34:31)
9. But if they *will repent and . . . harden not their hearts*, (3 Ne. 21:22)

The hendiadys structure of these passages tells us that the Nephites understood humbling oneself and not hardening one's heart to be essential dimensions of the repentance that they were being taught.

6. *Conclusions*

The foregoing analysis of hendiadyses featuring *repent/repentance* should be more than sufficient to demonstrate the extraordinary richness of that concept in Nephite discourse. But there is much more than can be reasonably discussed in this brief article. The commandment to repent appears in many other less-prominent hendiadyses that would seem to enrich the meaning of that term in additional ways. The Nephites were taught to repent and cry to/pray to/call upon God (Mosiah 11:25, Alma 22:16, Helaman 5:41, 3 Nephi 3:15 and 25, and Morm. 2:10). They were also expected to “repent and confess” their sins (Mosiah 26:29, 36 and 36, Helaman 16:5, and Moroni 6:7). In other passages they were

commanded to “repent and forsake” their sins (Mosiah 4:10, Alma 39:9, Ether 2:11 and 11:1), to “repent and prepare the way of the Lord” (Alma 7:9), to “repent and seek forgiveness” (Mosiah 4:10, Moroni 6:8), to “repent and turn” from evil ways (3 Nephi 30:2, Mormon 5:22), to “repent and be born again” (Alma 5:49 and 7:9), to “repent and hearken” (7:23, 3 Nephi 21:22), to “repent and work righteousness” (Alma 13:10), to “repent . . . and lay hold upon the gospel of Christ” (Mormon 7:8), to “repent and cleave unto God” (Jacob 6:5), to “repent and walk in his paths” (Alma 7:9), and many other examples.

It may be noticed that several of the examples provided above overlap with one another when more than one verb or noun is conjoined with repent/repentance in a hendiadys-like structure. Scholars have also noticed examples in the Old Testament where three or even four elements are linked in the same figure of speech and have labeled them accordingly with the terms *hendiadys* and *hendiadys*.⁴⁰ Because many of these terms are synonyms for basic gospel elements which appear throughout the Book of Mormon in meristic statements of the gospel, some care will need to be taken in the analysis of each passage to determine whether it is simply a merism meant to invoke the full list of gospel elements in the mind of the reader, or whether it is a variation on hendiadys in

See the discussion that begins in Lillas, p. 247.

which each of the multiple elements is intended to require a reinterpretation of the other terms, pointing to enriched meanings of *repentance*.

The discussion presented in this paper obviously does not exhaust all the possibilities for analyzing the language of repentance in the Book of Mormon. While it does look like the Book of Mormon terminology follows the Hebrew *shuv*, the use of the central form of hendiadys shows a much richer conjunction of other concepts. The Nephites understood repentance to include not only turning away from the wrong path to God's path. For them, that turning was grounded in a covenant that must be witnessed by baptism in water. Further, that repentance and baptism was only a beginning point—a gate by which the penitent entered into a “straight and narrow” path defined by God's commandments and by which he or she could be led day by day and be prepared to enter into the kingdom of God. All this and much more is packed into that Nephite concept, which shows how repentance is central to all the other concepts of the gospel of Christ. While the large number of gospel merisms found in the text of the Book of Mormon testifies that the Nephites could think of the six gospel elements in terms of a list, this initial study of *repentance* hendiadys also makes clear that the full meaning of any one of those elements inevitably borrowed a great deal from the meanings of the other elements, with *repentance* being perhaps the most central concept of the six.

