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2017

## The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways in the Book of Mormon

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### Original Publication Citation

BYU Studies Quarterly 56:3 (2017): 49-78

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Reynolds, Noel B., "The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways in the Book of Mormon" (2017). *Faculty Publications*. 3435.

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# The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon

*Noel B. Reynolds*

From its opening pages to the end, the Bible describes a bifurcated world in which God bids, commands, and teaches the people he has created to follow him in the way of righteousness, and in which the devil leads people into wickedness. And while great blessings and cursings are promised and realized in this life according to which way people choose to live their lives, the final judgment comes after this life when all will be judged according to whether they chose to follow good or evil. This way of seeing things surfaces explicitly in various texts and is known among scholars as the Doctrine of the Two Ways. It tends to appear in pedagogical contexts—and especially when God or his prophet is calling the wayward to repentance or to a renewal of covenants. This motif of an ongoing competition between good and evil for the souls of God’s children is not unique to the Bible but also occurs in the literature of many ancient cultures.

The principal scholarly discussions of the Two Ways doctrine over the last six decades have focused on noncanonical Jewish and Christian texts from the Greco-Roman era<sup>1</sup> in which the doctrine took on a more elaborate form—in a familiar kind of debate over the dating and sources for different writings. Much less attention has been given to the forms the doctrine takes in older biblical texts or in the writings of nonbiblical cultures in the ancient world.

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1. Scholars have given the label “Greco-Roman” to the Mediterranean cultures that prevailed between the transfer of Persian control of Egypt to Alexander in 332 BCE and the disintegration of the Roman Empire in 395 CE.

## Noel B. Reynolds

Scholars have long recognized that a number of ancient cultures shared a traditional Doctrine of the Two Ways that could be used to instruct youth and others in the right way to live their lives. While the language of the Two Ways surfaces on occasion in both the Old and New Testaments, the doctrine is not developed or explained in any detail in the Bible. However, noncanonical texts of the Greco-Roman period display a highly developed and stylized form of the doctrine in both Jewish and Christian traditions. The earliest known version of these stylized forms of the doctrine occurs in nonbiblical writings such as Hesiod and some early Persian texts but does not surface in the writings of biblical peoples until after the exile.



While LDS scholar Hugh Nibley often noted in his voluminous writings that the Book of Mormon writers also used the Two Ways doctrine, no one has yet undertaken a comparison of the Nephite teaching with these others. Because the Nephite prophets often referred to their central teaching of the gospel or doctrine of Christ as “the way” or “the right way,” I have undertaken this study to determine the extent to which their approach depends on any of these historical versions and to explore the ways in which their teaching may offer original explanations or formulations. An examination of a selection of prominent occurrences of the Doctrine of the Two Ways in the Book of Mormon shows that Book of Mormon usage is fully consistent with biblical examples, but that it goes far beyond them in providing background explanations for the Doctrine of the Two Ways as the Nephite prophets adapt it to the gospel revealed to them by Jesus Christ. Further, these passages display no familiarity with the stylized rhetorical form of the doctrine that characterizes the noncanonical Jewish and Christian texts of the Greco-Roman period.

While the same teaching has been noticed in the Book of Mormon, there is as yet no study that examines the Book of Mormon presentations systematically to identify the ways in which they might follow any of the ancient versions of the Two Ways doctrine, or the ways in which these might feature original formulations. In this paper, I will show that the Book of Mormon writers did retain most elements of the earliest biblical teaching, but with enriched understandings and unique formulations featured in the even more frequent recurrence of the Doctrine of the Two Ways in their prophetic teachings than found elsewhere. In the process, we will discover that their employment of the Two Ways doctrine clearly served Book of Mormon writers as a device to facilitate the understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ generally as the one true way by which men and women can find salvation—and specifically as an explanation of the fundamental necessity of repentance and obedience to the laws or covenants they had received from God. The Book of Mormon text refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ as “the way” or “the path” 108 times—even more frequently than the 67 times it uses the terms “doctrine” or “gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

### The Doctrine of the Two Ways in the Bible

**Genesis.** The Two Ways are introduced but not developed in the opening drama of Genesis as Adam and Eve are divinely commanded in one thing that is then contradicted by the serpent. They followed the serpent’s direction, instead of God’s, gaining the ability “to know good and evil” as a result, and subsequently were cursed and driven out of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). The Hebrew word for *road* or *way* (*derek*) is used once as a flaming sword was placed by the Lord God “to keep *the way* of the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).<sup>3</sup> While we traditionally interpret this to mean the sword guards or protects the tree of life, the Hebrew for *keep* here is *shamar*, which also has another primary meaning of *observe* as used next in Genesis two times in the Lord’s instructions to Abraham that he and his posterity should *keep* the covenant or the *way of the Lord* (Gen. 17:9–10).<sup>4</sup>

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2. See Noel B. Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 79–91.

3. Throughout the paper, I have introduced italics to focus the reader’s attention on key words in quoted materials.

4. If “the way of the Lord” and “the way of the tree of life” were interpreted to refer to the same thing, we might expect Nephi and Lehi to read this as

David Calabro helpfully points out that “the Hebrew phrase . . . translated as ‘the way of the tree of life’ in the King James version of Genesis 3:24, could also be translated as ‘the path leading to the tree of life,’”<sup>5</sup> a reading recognizable in Lehi’s dream in 1 Nephi 8.

In the very next pericope, this opposition is reformulated and generalized in the Lord’s response to Cain: “If thou *doest well*, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou *doest not well*, sin lieth at the door” (Gen. 4:7). The Hebrew *yātab* here suggests that *doing well* will be measured by acting or living in a way that will be pleasing to the Lord and according to one’s covenant with him. Congruent with the metaphor of God’s covenant or way of life as a road or path is the language of walking in his way. We are told twice that Enoch “walked with God” (Gen. 5:22–24). Noah also “walked with God,” but no one else did in his generation. Rather, “all flesh had corrupted his [God’s] way” (Gen. 6:9, 12).

The language of Genesis shifts explicitly to the parallel terminology of covenant keeping when Abraham comes on the scene. “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” Further, Abraham is admonished that both he and his posterity must “keep my covenant” (Gen. 17:7, 9). Then, in the lead-up to the Sodom and Gomorrah crisis, the Lord states his confidence in Abraham and his posterity, for “they shall *keep the way of the Lord*, to do justice and judgment” (Gen. 18:19).

The Abraham narrative also introduces the covenant language of blessings and cursings, which will also come to be associated with the Doctrine of the Two Ways. In the first announcement of this covenant with Abraham, the Lord tells him, “And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2–3). The blessing is confirmed again and linked to obedience when the Lord speaks to Abraham after his trial with Isaac: “And in thy seed

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a reference to the gospel or “the way,” which is “the only and true doctrine” “whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Ne. 31:21). Our task then would be to discover how the flaming sword would contribute to observing the commandments associated with the gospel.

5. David Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 26 (2017): 275 (forthcoming), online at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/lehis-dream-and-the-garden-of-eden/>.

shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:18).

The content of that obedience is specified more fully when the Lord renews the covenant with Abraham’s son Isaac: “Sojourn in this land, and I *will be with thee*, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swear unto Abraham thy father; and I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (Gen. 26:3–5). Jacob used similar language in vowing to worship the Lord, if he would “be with me, and will *keep me in this way* that I go” (Gen. 28:20). Seven chapters later he invokes the same phrasing in acknowledging that God “was with me *in the way* which I went” (Gen. 35:3).

As the foundational introductory framework for the whole of the Torah, the Two Ways doctrine seems to be implicit in the Genesis treatment of God’s people from Adam and Eve down through the patriarchs. While the way of evil is only suggested or named, “the way of the Lord” is characterized as a road or path that he walks and invites his human followers to walk with him. By implication, any other path people choose for themselves would be the wrong or the evil path. Beginning with Abraham, the language of covenant is introduced, and walking with God is rephrased as keeping his commandments, statutes, and laws. And blessings or cursings in this world will come to men and women as they do or do not keep those commandments. While the devil was introduced as an author of alternate ways for Adam and Eve, his role is not much mentioned in subsequent accounts.

**Psalms and Proverbs.** The ancient wisdom literature of Israel also uses the Two Ways doctrine extensively and more explicitly, but it sometimes resembles other ancient cultural traditions as much as it reflects the Israelite tradition of Genesis.<sup>6</sup> The proverbs are usually framed as advice from a wise father to his youthful son in language that works for any culture and does not depend exclusively on the covenant structure of Abrahamic religion with its revealed commandments, laws, and

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6. A leading authority on Jewish literature of the period, George Nickelsburg, has observed that the idiom of the two ways is “typical of biblical and post-biblical wisdom literature.” See George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 10.

statutes. Proverbs 2:10–23 provides an excellent example, as is well demonstrated in four selected verses:

Who leave the paths of uprightness,  
to walk in the ways of darkness. (Prov. 2:13)

Whose ways are crooked  
And they froward in their paths. (Prov. 2:15)

Which forsaketh the guide of her youth,  
and forgetteth the covenant of her God. (Prov. 2:17)

That thou mayest *walk in the way of good men,*  
and *keep the paths of the righteous.* (Prov. 2:20)

Obviously, the underlying binary structure of the proverbs lends itself structurally to the Two Ways tradition and repeatedly invokes the imagery of competing paths or ways in the parallel structure of these simple couplets.

It may be helpful as a side note to recognize here how scriptures in both the Bible and in the Book of Mormon speak of each of the Two Ways in singular and plural terms. Just as Proverbs 2:13 speaks of “paths of uprightness” and “the ways of darkness,” so also Mosiah 4:15, 29 will refer to “the ways of truth and soberness” and “the ways of sin.” I see these variations in the language of the Two Ways to be easily reconciled by the observation sometimes made explicit in these texts that while the Two Ways identified in general terms are to follow the path God gives us or the path the devil tempts us to take—usually by relying on our own wisdom or desires for guidance. But in reality, each of these two paths is many simply because we are many, and the actual lives two righteous people live will be different in many respects, and the same can be said for the lives of the wicked—who are each following the course of their own wisdom. This way of thinking about it invariably makes sense for me of the plural language that surfaces in many of the scriptural passages that will be discussed below.

The psalms assume the same division of mankind into two groups, the wicked and the righteous, and also use the imagery of their ways or paths in various contexts:

Blessed is the man that *walketh* not in the counsel of the ungodly,  
nor *standeth in the way* [or *path*] of sinners,  
nor *sitteth in the seat* of the scornful. . . .

For the Lord knoweth *the way of the righteous:*  
but *the way of the ungodly* shall perish. (Ps. 1:1, 6)

*Lead me, O Lord, in thy righteousness because of mine enemies;  
make thy way straight before my face. (Ps. 5:8)*

Oh let the wickedness of *the wicked* come to an end;  
but establish the just:  
for the *righteous* God trieth the hearts and reins. (Ps. 7:9)

Centuries later, the writers of Qumran and the early Christians will draw on these words and teachings from the Psalms, as discussed below.

**Deuteronomy.** The later Jewish and Christian expansions of the Doctrine of the Two Ways will also lean heavily on familiar formulations drawn from Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 11, we read, “Behold, I set before you today a *blessing* and a *curse*: the *blessing*, if you obey the *commandments* of the Lord your God which I command you today; and the *curse*, if you do not obey the *commandments* of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the *way* which I command you today, to go after other gods which you have not known” (Deut. 11:26–28 NKJV). In Deuteronomy 30, this blessing and cursing is expanded: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil” (Deut. 30:15 NKJV) with the added explanation and admonition “that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to *walk in His ways*, and to *keep his commandments*, His Statutes, and His Judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will *bless* you in the land which you go to possess” (30:16 NKJV). The negative possibility is also expanded: “But if your heart *turns away* so that you do not hear, and *are drawn away*, and worship other gods and serve them, . . . you shall surely *perish*” (30:17–18 NKJV). The concluding admonition becomes “*choose life*, that both you and your descendants may *live*; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may *obey His voice*, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your *life*” (30:19–20 NKJV). This choice between the ways of life and death will become thematic for some of the later Two Ways traditions, as well as for Book of Mormon writers.<sup>7</sup>

**The Prophets.** Finally, the Two Ways doctrine is also found in the third part of the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets. For example, Jeremiah reduces the choice of ways to life and death: “Behold, I set before you

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7. Mack Stirling has examined much of the Two Ways material in the Book of Mormon in his doctrinal study on the ways of life and death. See Mack C. Stirling, “The Way of Life and the Way of Death in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 152–204.



the way of life and the way of death” (Jer. 21:8 NKJV). Isaiah famously distinguished between the ways of man and of God:

- A For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
 B neither are your *ways* my *ways*, saith the Lord.  
 C For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
 B' so are my *ways* higher than your *ways*,  
 A' and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8–9)<sup>8</sup>

Ezekiel extends a similar idea in much more detail. Ezekiel 18 explains how the Lord holds all people responsible for their own sins and not those of others—not even the sins of their parents or their children—and rewards both the righteous and the wicked according to their willingness to repent effectively. Restating and summarizing at the end of the chapter, he writes:

Yet ye say, *The way of the Lord* is not equal (fair). Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not *my way* equal? are not *your ways* unequal? When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and *dieth* in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he *die*. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul *alive*. Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely *live*, he shall *not die*. Yet saith the house of Israel, *The way of the Lord* is not equal. O house of Israel, are not *my ways* equal? are not *your ways* unequal? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to *his ways*, saith the Lord God. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. (Ezek. 18:25–30)

With that explanation in place, Ezekiel then restates the Lord’s call to Israel to abandon their transgressions, to get themselves a new heart and a new spirit—to repent and live, and not die (Ezek. 18:31–32).

**New Testament.** Not surprisingly, the writers of the New Testament perpetuate the Doctrine of the Two Ways, although with new applications. Jesus used the image of Two Ways somewhat differently, with the same emphasis on life and death, but emphasizing the ease of the way that leads to destruction and the difficulty of the way that leads to life. “Enter by *the narrow gate*; for wide is *the gate* and broad is *the way* that leads to *destruction*, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the *gate* and difficult is *the way* which leads to *life*, and there are few

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8. Later Jewish, Christian, and Nephite writers emphasize other Two Ways references from Isaiah (2:3, 5; 3:12; 8:11, 20; 9:2; 40:3; 48:17; 49:9, 11).

who find it” (Matt. 7:13–14 NKJV). He also taught “I am *the way, the truth, and the life*. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6 NKJV), and some early Christians apparently referred to their church or its gospel as “*the way*.” As Aaron Milavec explains:

The notion that there are two well-defined paths would have been familiar to a Jewish audience. . . . Psalm 1, for instance, contrasts “the way of the righteous” with “the way of the wicked.” The first-named are defined as those who “delight . . . in the law [Torah] of the Lord” (Ps 1:2). Standing in this tradition, it is no surprise that the Jesus movement was known in some circles as “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). This was undoubtedly due to the fact that its members were trained in “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17), “the way of the Lord” (Acts 18:25), or “the way of God” (Acts 18:26)—terms used repeatedly in the Septuagint. In 2 Peter false teachers are spoken of as having left “the way of truth” (2:2), “the right way” (2:15), “the way of righteousness” (2:21) in order to follow “the way of Balaam” (2:15). According to the Q Gospel, Jesus contrasts “the narrow gate” with “the wide gate” (Matt 7:13–14; Luke 13:23–24). The former “way is hard” but “leads to life” while the latter “way is easy” but “leads to destruction.” In each of these cases the two-way mentality is evident, yet, in none of them is there the suggestion that the *Didache* was known or used to flesh out the exact meaning of the Way of Life.<sup>9</sup>

### Noncanonical Jewish and Early Christian Two Ways Texts

While the Doctrine of the Two Ways surfaces in only a few biblical passages, a much larger number point to one or the other of the two ways—either the ways of God or of men—assuming that the hearer is aware of the other, which will make the meaning clear. Some of these passages have received more attention than others from the scholars who, since the 1960s, have analyzed the uses and origins of the Doctrine of the Two Ways in the Bible and in associated literatures. Much of this attention was stimulated by Robert Kraft’s 1965 translation and joint commentary on *Barnabas* and *Didache*, two early Christian texts that borrow the language of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah and illustrate the importance of this motif in early Christian literature.<sup>10</sup> While the bulk of this scholarly literature focused on standard dating and source issues raised by

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9. Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003), 45.

10. Robert A. Kraft, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*, vol. 3, *Barnabas and Didache* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1965).

these two documents, the emergence of the Dead Sea Scrolls in this same time period raised new questions as it became evident that earlier Jewish documents exhibited an emphasis on a version of the Two Ways doctrine that was represented subsequently in these Christian texts.<sup>11</sup> Form critic Klaus Baltzer accommodated all these developments with his claim that the Doctrine of the Two Ways developed in Jewish writings from “the basic commandment ‘to walk according to God’s ways.’”<sup>12</sup>

The *Didache* is usually treated as a key text by scholars of early Christianity because of its generally accepted antiquity and its presumed function as a catechism for Christian converts possibly even in the first century and because it announces this doctrine in its opening lines:

There are two ways: one of life and one of death!  
(And) [there is] a great difference between the two ways.<sup>13</sup>

But the similarities of this text with *Pseudo-Barnabas* and some others have led scholars to divide over which text might have been the source for the other, or whether—even more likely—both are drawn from an even earlier Two Ways text.<sup>14</sup>

While many questions about the original composition, influence, and uses of *Barnabas* and *Didache* continue to attract significant scholarly inquiry, these documents make it quite clear that the Christians of the first and second centuries did have a Doctrine of the Two Ways that likely played a significant role in the catechization of converts and in preaching repentance to the faithful.<sup>15</sup> In these and other sources, it is evident that the early Christians were drawing on both Old and New Testament sources, as well as other contemporary writings such as the Dead Sea text from Qumran.

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11. This can be readily seen in the Damascus document, the Community Rule, and in the lesser-known Fragment 4Q473—all of which will be discussed in more detail below.

12. Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 180.

13. *Didache* 1:1, Milavec translation, p. 3.

14. Kraft, *Apostolic Fathers*, 3:4–16, presents an extended study of the possible relations between these and other related texts, without any clear conclusions.

15. See James N. Rhodes, “The Two Ways Tradition in the *Epistle of Barnabas*: Revisiting an Old Question,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2011): 797–816, for a helpful reflection on the scholarly debates of the last six decades and discussion of some current issues.

**The Dead Sea Scrolls.** As already mentioned, much of the earlier scholarship that viewed the flowering of the Two Ways teaching as a Christian development had to be reconsidered after the earlier texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls became available. The opening exhortation of the Damascus Document speaks copiously of and repeatedly opposes “the ways of evil,” “the paths of sin,” and following “their own will” or “willful hearts” or the “will of his own spirit,” instead of turning to God’s “wonderful ways,” “the proper way,” “paths of righteousness,” or even God’s “mysterious ways.” Apostates from the new covenant are described in this same highly charged text as having “*traitorously* turned away from the *fountain of living water*.”<sup>16</sup> The Community Rule compiles rules for those who have entered this new eternal covenant with God and see themselves as Children of Light or The Way. In absolute terms, this document says that they were foreordained to “walk *faultless* in all the ways of God,” without turning aside to “*the right nor the left*”—not deviating “in *the smallest detail* from all of His words.” Recognizing the human tendency to “walk in the *stubbornness*” of their own hearts, initiates should seek “atonement for a man’s ways.” God has strictly appointed for humankind “*two spirits* in which to walk until the time ordained for His visitation. These are the spirits of truth and falsehood.” While the righteous “walk in the paths of *light*,” the wicked “walk in the paths of *darkness*.” For the Sons of Light, the God of Israel and his Angel of Light are said to completely enlighten “a man’s mind, making straight before him the paths of true righteousness and causing his heart to fear the laws of God,” engendering “*humility, patience, abundant compassion, perpetual goodness, insight, understanding, and powerful wisdom*” in the process.

The path one chooses absolutely determines one’s rewards in this life and the next. “All who walk in this spirit will *know healing, bountiful peace, long life, and multiple progeny*, followed by eternal blessings and perpetual joy through life everlasting. They will abundantly receive a *crown of glory with a robe of honor*, resplendent forever and ever.” While on the other extreme, “the operations of *the spirit of falsehood* result in greed, neglect of righteous deeds, wickedness, lying, pride and haughtiness, cruel deceit and fraud, massive hypocrisy, a want of self-control and abundant foolishness, a zeal for arrogance, abominable

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16. All references to the Dead Sea Scrolls are taken from Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). These phrases are excerpted from pages 51–61.

deeds fashioned by whorish desire, lechery in its filthy manifestation . . . to the end of *walking* in all the *ways of darkness and evil cunning*.” “The judgment of all who walk in such *ways* will be multiple afflictions at the hand of all the *angels of perdition*, everlasting damnation in the wrath of God’s furious vengeance, never-ending terror and reproach for all eternity, with a shameful extinction in the fire of *Hell’s outer darkness*.”<sup>17</sup>

The Qumran community derived the simple label of “the *Way*” from Isaiah. People who progress “conforming to these doctrines . . . shall separate from the session of perverse men to go to the wilderness, there to prepare the *way* of truth, as it is written, ‘In the wilderness prepare the *way* of the Lord, *make straight* in the desert a *highway* for our God’” (Isa. 40:3).<sup>18</sup> But much further direction was provided for the instructor of “those who have chosen the *Way*.” He is to instruct them “in truly *wondrous* mysteries” that “the *secret Way* [may be] *perfected* among [them].” “Each will walk *blamelessly*” in this time of “preparing the *way*.” “These are the precepts of the *Way* for the Instructor in these times.”<sup>19</sup> These expressions clearly reflect development well beyond its canonical predecessors.

Finally, the small fragment known only as 4Q473 as reconstructed presents the Doctrine of the Two Ways in almost the same Deuteronomic language that would be used a century or so later to open that discussion in *Didache*. “He is setting [before you a blessing and a curse. These are] t[wo] *ways*, one goo[d and one evil. If you walk in the good *way*,] He will bless you. But if you walk in the [evil] *way*, [He will curse you].”<sup>20</sup> In this text, the Two Ways doctrine seems to reflect only the older tradition.

**The Form Critical Perspective of Margaret McKenna.** Probably because of its much broader approach to the Two Ways traditions in early Christian writers, the 1981 PhD dissertation of Margaret McKenna seems not to have been used by any of the numerous writers on this topic over the last three decades, including her dissertation adviser, Robert Kraft.<sup>21</sup> While they have focused their efforts on questions of chronological priority and interdependence between a number of Greco-Roman period Christian and Jewish writings, McKenna took on the related but

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17. Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 129–131.

18. Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 138.

19. Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 140.

20. Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 405.

21. Margaret McKenna, “‘The Two Ways’ in Jewish and Christian Writings of the Greco-Roman Period: A Study of the Form of Repentance Parenthesis” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1981).

much larger task of collecting and carefully categorizing the principal examples of Two Ways motifs in ancient literatures of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions—all from the perspective of twentieth-century form criticism.<sup>22</sup> I find McKenna's study particularly valuable, not only because of her comprehensive approach to ancient literature, but especially because of her detailed form-critical approach, which makes it possible to detect trends and relationships between different strands of Two Ways traditions. While her conclusions apply to a wide range of issues, I will draw on only a few of these here to illuminate some of the shared and distinctive features of Two Ways passages in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon.

McKenna began her search for a consistent form of Two Ways texts with a study of texts from the Greco-Roman period that explicitly employ “the phrase *Two Ways* in a textual unit.” The texts selected for initial analysis and comparison were: *Testament of Asher* 1, 2 *Enoch* 30, *Didache* 1–6, *Pseudo-Barnabas* 18–20, *Sibylline Oracles* 8, and Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* 5:31.<sup>23</sup> Without my going into detail to explain her thorough exposition of this development, McKenna found a recurring and complex form of the Two Ways doctrine in these texts:

Two Ways Texts are characterized by a unity of antithetical structure and thematic content composed of five elements: way imagery, guides, ethical content, ends, and turns which appear in a great variety of expressions. Their function is [almost always] repentance parenthesis.

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22. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a group of German biblical scholars developed a method of textual interpretation that began with identifying units of text with recognized genres that exhibited standard form across multiple occurrences, including prose and poetry, which were subsequently divided into history, legends, myths, hymns, psalms, and prophetic oracles. See Oxford University Press, “Form Criticism,” *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e693> (accessed September 12, 2016). The approach is widely credited with advancing biblical interpretation in important ways, but seemed to run out of new creativity after mid-century (James Muilenberg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 1 [March 1969]: 1–18), and even ran into strong criticism when form critics assumed the literary forms they had identified were fixed entities. Later scholars point out that biblical writers “repeatedly find ways to juggle and transform generic conventions, formulaic or otherwise, and on occasion push genre beyond its own formal or thematic limits.” See Robert Alter, “Psalms,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 247.

23. McKenna, “Two Ways in Jewish and Christian Writings,” 32–33.

They appear in a limited and recurring variety of life contexts which are related to this general function.<sup>24</sup>

McKenna's analysis of dozens of early Christian texts shows that this model featuring these specific five elements, presented through an antithetical structure, and functioning as repentance preaching, seems to guide a significant number of stylized Two Ways passages. McKenna recognized that this identifiable, recurring form obviously developed over time, and the handful of preexilic examples are not nearly so complete or well-defined as are those from the second- and third-century Christians.<sup>25</sup> While her Two Ways texts bear obvious similarities with older covenant-making and renewal texts, she argues that even though these two text-types clearly share some form and terminology, they each have their consistently distinct elements and functions.<sup>26</sup>

After searching through the older literature of the ancient world, she found three clear early precedents—two in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and one Persian—all of which plausibly share even more ancient Aryan links. She recognizes that there are simply no texts available that could test such a speculated connection. But it is clear that the Two Ways metaphor and literary form featuring antithetical imagery blossomed in the postexilic period of Jewish writings and that the highly developed form used in Qumran and early Christianity comes through that line. She also detected differences in writers who were more influenced by the Persian or the Greek perspective, but she was not inclined to argue for direct influence by either tradition.<sup>27</sup> Her survey

indicates irresistibly that the great dividing line in the history of the Two Ways tradition is the exile. While there are several pre-exilic texts that relate to the Two Ways tradition, there are (with the sole exception of Hesiod 13:12–14:10) no Two Ways texts, properly so called, in existence until the exile comes at least into view (as e.g. in Jr 21, Dt 30 and Ez 18). Also, of the texts listed from the OT, the only fully developed . . . texts are from the Wisdom writings, and the largest group of fully developed Two Ways texts are from extra-canonical writings of the Greco-Roman period.<sup>28</sup>

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24. McKenna, "Two Ways in Jewish and Christian Writings," 281.

25. McKenna, "Two Ways in Jewish and Christian Writings," 273.

26. McKenna, "Two Ways in Jewish and Christian Writings," 288–90.

27. McKenna, "Two Ways in Jewish and Christian Writings," 293–97, and especially 330, 377–87.

28. McKenna, "Two Ways in Jewish and Christian Writings," 293–94. McKenna focused her study on texts that use the phrase "two ways" and that exhibit most of the standard features identified by her form critical analysis.



## The Book of Mormon

While readers of the Book of Mormon have long known that the book is informed by the Two Ways teaching and advances it repeatedly in a variety of contexts, there has not previously been any attempt to assess the content and the variations that may occur in that teaching. Nor has there been any systematic effort to compare Book of Mormon versions of the doctrine with the Jewish and Christian versions surveyed above. Twentieth-century Book of Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley referred repeatedly in his writings to “the famous and ubiquitous doctrine of the Two Ways,” but as far as I have been able to determine, he never explored how it is embedded in Nephite discourse.<sup>29</sup>

In what follows, I will survey and document about a dozen exemplary passages in the Book of Mormon that explicitly refer to two paths or ways to assess the extent to which these follow or vary from each other or from the Jewish and Christian models listed above. I will then illustrate how the prevalence of this teaching throughout the Book of Mormon goes hand in hand with the idea that there is only one true way

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29. Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, ed. John W. Welch, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 19 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 498. Nibley’s real message may be to biblical scholars who have not usually recognized how widespread this doctrine was in ancient Near East cultures. In other writings, Nibley did demonstrate culturally diverse examples of the doctrine in the ancient world. See Hugh Nibley, “The Ancient Law of Liberty,” *The World and the Prophets*, ed. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillam, and Don E. Norton, *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 3 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 182–85; Hugh Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: The Forty-day Mission of Christ—The Forgotten Heritage,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks, *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 4 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 16; and Hugh Nibley, “The Expanding Gospel,” *Temple and Cosmos*, ed. Don E. Norton and Stephen D. Ricks, *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 12 (Provo, Utah: Foundations for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 195–99. His one-volume text on the Book of Mormon does not mention the doctrine. See Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed., ed. John W. Welch, *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 6 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988). See also Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 521–22, where Betz briefly reviews the ancient Jewish, Egyptian, and Greek literature that uses the Two Ways motif.



by which men and women can be saved in the kingdom of God, and that that way is provided by the gospel of Jesus Christ, which in turn is made possible through his Atonement.

Any reader familiar with the Jewish and Christian Two Ways writings listed above will have no difficulty recognizing similar passages in the Book of Mormon. In fact, the first impression will be that the Two Ways appear to be thematic from the beginning to the end of the book and are developed even more explicitly and extensively in a number of sermons and editorial commentaries. As many as a hundred less-obvious passages assume the Two Ways doctrine implicitly for their meanings. In the following analysis of a dozen salient passages, it becomes clear that the Nephite prophets saw themselves (1) continuing the preexilic views, (2) adapting that approach to accommodate the revelations of Christ's gospel as they had received it directly, and (3) providing a rich portfolio of background explanations for their version of the Two Ways doctrine, explanations which have little analog in the literature discussed to this point. In addition, as readers will observe, the distinctive five-theme, antithetically structured form identified by Margaret McKenna in the Two Ways teachings of the Greco-Roman period plays no significant role here. The Nephite prophets do invoke the Two Ways doctrine principally in repentance preaching, and they do sometimes provide antithetical comparisons of the two ways, but the developed Two Ways form used by Jewish and Christian writers of the Greco-Roman period does not occur as far as I have been able to determine.

### **The Two Ways Doctrine Taught by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob**

**Lehi.** The first explicit Book of Mormon description of human lives in terms of their choices between Two Ways (or paths) occurs in Nephi's summary description of the vision or dream his father, Lehi, received shortly after leading his family out of Jerusalem at the Lord's command. In this dream, Lehi found himself being led for hours by a man dressed in white across "a dark and dreary waste" and finally to "a tree whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" and the "most sweet, above all that I ever had before tasted" and "white to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen" (1 Ne. 8:4–11).<sup>30</sup> Looking around, Lehi discovered that "a *straight and narrow path*" led to the tree and was equipped with an iron rod that would help

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30. All Book of Mormon quotations are taken from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

people follow the path, even when the path was obscured in a “mist of darkness.” Although great multitudes grasped the rod and began the journey on the path, many “fell away into *forbidden paths* and were lost,” or were “lost . . . wandering in *strange roads*” (1 Ne. 8:20, 23–32). Even Lehi’s eldest sons, after coming to him at the tree, were among those who fell away—leading him to share his dream with his family and to “exhort them then with all the feeling of a tender parent that they would hearken to his words, in that perhaps the Lord would be merciful to them and not cast them off” (1 Ne. 8:36–37). And so the iconic *straight and narrow path* so frequently used in Book of Mormon repentance paraenesis<sup>31</sup> was first counterposed to “forbidden paths” and “strange roads.”

In launching the second half of his first book, Nephi rehearses his father’s prophecies about a coming Messiah, whose gospel would be taken to Israel and to the Gentiles alike. And again he emphasizes the eschatological version of the Two Ways doctrine that “the *way* is prepared” if men and women will “repent and come unto him.” But those who seek to do wickedly “must be cast off forever” (1 Ne. 10:18–21).

Lehi continues by calling his oldest sons to repentance with an allusion to Deuteronomy 4:8 and the Two Ways language of blessing and cursing. If the oldest sons “will hearken unto the voice of Nephi,” he will “leave unto [them] a blessing” (2 Ne. 1:28). But he fears for them because of their rebelliousness, that they may be “cursed with a sore cursing” and “cut off from [the Lord’s] presence” and “come down into captivity.” For the *ways* of the Lord “are righteousness forever” (2 Ne. 1:19–22). “Awake, my sons, put on the armor of righteousness, shake off the chains with which ye are bound, and come forth out of obscurity and arise from the dust” (2 Ne. 1:23).

As Lehi moves on to a blessing for his younger son Jacob, he shifts into the mode of doctrinal instruction and provides an account of the Two Ways doctrine that seems both original and new. Lehi begins with an explanation of the Atonement performed by the Holy Messiah, the Redeemer, who has prepared *the way* for the salvation of humankind, who have been “cut off,” having perished “from that which is good,” having become “miserable forever” (2 Ne. 2:3–5). Because he laid “down

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31. Jacob’s description of the “righteous” path of the Lord as both narrow and straight (2 Ne. 9:41) is implicitly invoked in several simpler passages such as 1 Nephi 10:8; 2 Nephi 4:33; Alma 7:9 and 19; and Alma 37:12, echoing the biblical patterns seen in Isaiah 42:16 as reflected in Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; and in Hebrews 12:13.

his life” and took it again, he brought to pass the resurrection. “And they that believe in him shall be saved” (2 Ne. 2:8–9). Because he made “intercession for all the children of men,” they must all “stand in the presence of him to be judged of him according to the truth and holiness which is in him” (2 Ne. 2:9–10). This much sounds quite familiar, but Lehi goes on to provide a theological explanation for this, setting out as his starting point the necessity of “an opposition in all things.” Without this there could be no wickedness nor righteousness, happiness nor misery, good nor bad, life nor death, corruption nor incorruption, sense nor insensibility, law nor sin. There could be “no purpose in the end of . . . creation,” which would “destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes” (2 Ne. 2:11–12).

In that context of opposition in all things, “the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself,” which could not occur unless “he were enticed by the one or the other” (2 Ne. 2:16). And so the source of opposition is pushed back to the time when “*an angel of God . . . had fallen from heaven*” and “*became a devil*,” and “*sought also the misery of all mankind*” (2 Ne. 2:17–18). Likewise, all people “were lost because of the transgression of their parents,” and so their days “were prolonged . . . that they might repent while in the flesh.” And the Lord God commanded “that all men must repent,” making of this mortal life “a state of probation” (2 Ne. 2:21). But through the redemption provided by the Messiah, men and women “have become free forever, *knowing good from evil*, to act for themselves. . . . They are *free to choose liberty and eternal life . . . or to choose captivity and death*” (2 Ne. 2:26–27). Applying this doctrine to his own sons, Lehi mounts his final appeal: “I would that ye should look to the great Mediator and hearken unto his great commandments and be faithful unto his words and *choose eternal life according to the will of his Holy Spirit*, and *not choose eternal death according to the will of the flesh* and the evil which is therein, which giveth *the spirit of the devil* power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that *he may reign over you* in his own kingdom” (2 Ne. 2:28–29).

**The Early Nephi.** Next, Nephi reports that he was also allowed to share his father’s great vision, which he now describes in much greater detail using the same binary language associated with Two Ways preaching. Nephi saw that the iron rod was “the word of God” (1 Ne. 11:25), a phrase that refers repeatedly to the gospel or doctrine of Christ in the writings of Nephi and later prophets.<sup>32</sup> It can also refer to “the words of

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32. Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” 85.

Christ,” which Nephi later equates to the specific gospel principle that personal guidance by the Holy Ghost “will shew unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Ne. 32:5). Nephi was also shown the nativity, the baptism, and the ministry of the Messiah that would come to the Jews, and was taught “that all men *must come unto him* or they cannot be saved” (1 Ne. 13:40).<sup>33</sup> He was shown a future time when the Messiah would come to the Nephites after which “three generations did pass away in righteousness.” But that did not last forever, and he also saw that “the mists of darkness are the temptations of the devil” that lead the children of men “into *broad roads* that they perish and are lost” (1 Ne. 12:11, 17), implicitly contrasting these evil ways with the “straight and narrow path” of the vision.

Nephi’s extended vision account then moves on to the future Gentiles who would come to this same promised land, bringing with them the Bible, which originally had contained the fullness of the gospel, but from which “many parts which are plain and most precious” had been removed, leading to a perversion of “the *right ways* of the Lord” (1 Ne. 13:24–27). But the fullness of the gospel will be brought forth to the Gentiles, and Nephi learns that “if the Gentiles repent, it shall be well with them,” but “whoso repenteth not must perish” (1 Ne. 14:5). The eschatological focus of the Two Ways doctrine as taught to Nephi in this vision continues to be evident as the long-term outcomes of following one way or the other are distinguished:

For the time cometh, saith the Lamb of God, that I will work a great and a marvelous work among the children of men, a work which shall be everlasting, either on the one hand or on the other, either to the convincing of them unto peace and life eternal or unto the deliverance of them to the hardness of their hearts and the blindness of their minds, unto their being brought down into captivity, and also unto destruction both temporally and spiritually, according to the captivity of the devil of which I have spoken. (1 Ne. 14:7)

This binary language is emphasized when Nephi identifies the multiplicity of churches of that latter day solely in terms of the two authors of the opposed paths they promote: “Behold, there is save it be two churches; the one is the church of the Lamb of God and the other is the church of the devil” (1 Ne. 14:10). Nephi returns again to an exhortation of his

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33. See my paper “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits into the Nephite Gospel,” *The Religious Educator* 18, no. 2 (2017): 15–29, for a detailed treatment of this and other similar scriptural statements.

brothers, that they should “hearken unto the word of God and . . . *hold fast* unto it,” so that “they would never perish, neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to *lead them away* to destruction” (1 Ne. 15:24).

The eternal consequences of following the right or the wrong paths receive one final emphasis. Explaining the vision further to his brothers, Nephi said that there was “an awful gulf” separating the wicked from “the saints of God,” which was “that awful hell . . . prepared for the wicked.” And “the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous” (1 Ne. 15:28–30).

Wherefore they must be brought to stand before God to be judged of their works. . . . And if they be filthy, it must needs be that they cannot dwell in the kingdom of God; . . . there cannot any unclean thing enter into the kingdom of God. . . . Wherefore the final state of the soul of man is to dwell in the kingdom of God or to be cast out because of that justice of which I have spoken. Wherefore the wicked are separated from the righteous. (1 Ne. 15:33–36)

The language of the Two Ways resurfaces explicitly as Nephi ends by urging his brothers to “*walk uprightly* before God” and expresses his new hope “that they would *walk in the paths of righteousness*” (1 Ne. 16:3–5).

Following the final blessings and teachings of Lehi to his family in 2 Nephi 1–4, Nephi records his own plea to God, employing once again the Two Ways language to articulate his own struggles with temptation and “the enemy of my soul.” He prays that the Lord will keep “the *gates of hell* . . . shut continually before [him],” but that he will “not shut the *gates of [the Lord’s] righteousness* before [him].” Further, Nephi prays that he “may *walk in the path* of the low valley,” and that he may “be strict in the *plain road*.” He prays that the Lord will “make a *way* for [his] escape” from his enemies, that he will “*make [his] path straight* before [him],” that he “not place a stumbling block in [Nephi’s] *way*,” but that he would “clear [his] *way* before [him] . . . and hedge not up [his] *way* but the *ways* of [his] enemy” (2 Ne. 4:28, 32–33).

**Jacob.** By far the most extensive and multifaceted development of the Two Ways doctrine that I have seen anywhere occurs in the central section of the sermon that Jacob, the younger brother and spiritual heir of the first principal prophet/recorder Nephi, delivers to the Nephite people as recorded in chapter 9 of 2 Nephi. While drawing on a number of the familiar Two Ways themes, he goes on to include several unique formulations and to meld the elements of the biblical preexilic themes with a highly developed account of the gospel of Jesus Christ in one

comprehensive Two Ways perspective. At the conclusion of the full sermon, Jacob then reminds his hearers that they “are free to act for [themselves], to choose *the way* of everlasting death or *the way* of eternal life.” They can accomplish this by reconciling themselves “to the will of God and not to the will of the devil and the flesh” (2 Ne. 10:23–24). After an extensive earlier call to repentance, Jacob acknowledges that “the words of truth are hard against all uncleanness.” But, as he explains, “the righteous fear it not, for they love the truth and are not shaken” (2 Ne. 9:40). With this warning, he extends his central appeal and brings the eschatological context and Two Ways structure of his doctrine into focus: “O then, my beloved brethren, come unto the Lord, the Holy One. 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 he employeth no servant there. And there is *none other way* save it be by *the gate*, for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name” (2 Ne. 9:41).

Although this passage from Jacob is much richer conceptually than the related passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:13–14), Jacob’s text raises the same question about the location of the gate in the image that has troubled Bible scholars. Is the gate at the beginning or at the end of the path? Hans Dieter Betz has argued that the image in the Sermon on the Mount requires the strait and broad gates to be at the end of the two paths—one opening to the heavenly Jerusalem, and the other to hell.<sup>34</sup> But Jacob is clearly following the teaching of his older brother Nephi, who learned in a very early vision that “the *gate* by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism. . . . And then are ye in this *straight and narrow path* which leads to eternal life” (2 Ne. 31:17–18). So, entering on this path requires divine approval of one’s repentance and baptism, and the final judgment comes at the end—approval that comes with “a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Ne. 31:17). Nephi’s location of the gate at the beginning of the path emphasizes the clear teaching of all Nephite prophets after him that the first step on the true path has to be sincere individual repentance.

Repentance is the key, and “he will not open unto them” who “are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches . . . save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility” (2 Ne. 9:42). The “happiness which is prepared for the saints” will be hid forever from the

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34. See Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 520–23.

unrepentant (2 Ne. 9:43). To emphasize the seriousness of his invitation to repentance, Jacob shakes his garment before his brethren so that at the day of judgment, the God of Israel will know “that I shook your iniquities from my soul and that I stand with brightness before him and am rid of your blood” (9:44). He then launches one more appeal: “O my beloved brethren, *turn away* from your sins. *Shake off the chains* of him that would bind you fast. *Come unto that God* who is the rock of *your salvation*. Prepare your souls for that glorious day when *justice* shall be administered unto the *righteous*, even the *day of judgment*” (2 Ne. 9:45–46).

In the lead-up to this central passage, we are introduced to many additional features of Jacob’s version of the Doctrine of the Two Ways. Jacob begins his paraenesis by referring to the ancient “*covenants* of the Lord, that he hath *covenanted* with all the house of Israel . . . by the mouth of his holy prophets . . . from the beginning down from generation to generation” until they shall be restored to the true “fold of God, when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance and shall be established in all their lands of promise” (2 Ne. 9:1–2). Jacob thus reminds his brethren that they have cause to rejoice “because of the *blessings* which the Lord God shall bestow upon [their] children” (2 Ne. 9:3) in accordance with the Abrahamic covenant.

To this point, Jacob is providing an enriched and integrated version of what we have read in the preexilic portions of the Old Testament. But then he transitions immediately into a Christian account of the Fall, which brought death upon all people and made “a power of resurrection” necessary “to fulfill *the merciful plan* of the great Creator” (2 Ne. 9:5–6). Because fallen men and women “were cut off from the presence of the Lord,” it was also necessary that there be “an infinite atonement” (2 Ne. 9:6–7). Thus cut off, “our spirits must become subject to that *angel which fell* from before the presence of the Eternal God and became the *devil*, to rise no more. And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil—to be shut out from the presence of our God” (2 Ne. 9:8–9).

In the face of such a hopeless eventuality, Jacob exclaims his praise for the great “goodness of our God who *prepareth a way* for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster”—*death and hell*—“which I call the *death* of the body and also the *death* of the spirit” (2 Nephi 9:10). But “because of *the way of deliverance* of our God, . . . hell must deliver up its captive spirits and the grave must deliver up its captive bodies. And the bodies and the spirits of men will be restored one to the other”



(2 Ne. 9:11–12). Because they have again become “living souls,” they will have “a perfect knowledge”—for the wicked “a perfect knowledge of all [their] guilt and [their] uncleanness and [their] nakedness”—and for the righteous “a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with *the robe of righteousness*” (2 Ne. 9:13–14). “And then cometh the *judgment*,” and “they which are *righteous*” will “inherit the kingdom of God,” and “they which are *filthy* . . . the *devil and his angels*, . . . shall go away into *everlasting fire*” (2 Ne. 9:15–18).

Jacob then goes on to contrast “the merciful *plan of the great Creator*,” or the “great *plan of our God*” (2 Ne. 9:6, 13) with the “cunning *plan of the evil one*” (2 Nephi 9:28). Wilhelm Michaelis has shown us that the biblical term for *way* (ὁδος), when referring to human lives, can often be best translated as *plan*.<sup>35</sup> Jacob likewise moves back and forth between the language of *way* and *plan*. He praises the greatness, justice, mercy, and holiness of God, who delivers “his saints from that awful monster, the *devil and death and hell*” by coming “into the world that he may save all men, if they will hearken unto his voice” (2 Ne. 9:17–21). The Christian character of the plan as understood by Jacob becomes clear as he then proceeds to spell out the gospel or way to salvation that will be explained in greater detail by his brother Nephi in chapter 31 at the end of this same book, listing five of the six elements of that gospel or doctrine of Christ.<sup>36</sup> Jacob uniquely sees this gospel as a law given by “the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel,” for those who would “be saved in the kingdom of God.” But, “if they will not repent and believe in his name and be baptized in his name and endure to the end, they must be damned” (2 Ne. 9:23–24). The Two Ways are now stated in terms of the Christian gospel, and only those who follow God’s law and embrace that gospel and endure to the end can be saved.

But Jacob also recognizes that many peoples have not received this gospel or law, and goes on to explain that the law can have no hold

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35. Wilhelm Michaelis, “ὁδος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:50.

36. For an explanation of how this six-element definition of the gospel of Jesus Christ is established in the text, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 218–34. See also the detailed discussion of 2 Nephi 31 in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Nephi,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 65–66.



on such people, but that “the mercies of the Holy One of Israel hath claim upon them because of the atonement, for they are delivered by the power of him” (2 Ne. 9:25). These will be “delivered from that awful monster, *death and hell and the devil*” and be restored to God. “But woe unto him that hath the law given, . . . that hath all the commandments of God, . . . and that transgresseth them and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state” (2 Ne. 9:26–27). It has become clear that the Two Ways doctrine applies only to those who have received the true way—the law or the gospel.

Jacob turns next to an account of the other path or “cunning *plan* of the evil one,” which exploits “the vainness and the frailties and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves” (2 Ne. 9:28). He then goes on to specify the common failings or sins of those who yield “to the enticings of that cunning one,” by pronouncing woes on those who commit any of a list of nine offenses (2 Ne. 9:30–39). Those who are “carnally minded” are on the path to death, while the “spiritually minded” are headed for life eternal (2 Ne. 9:39).

Having spelled out the Two Ways, Jacob issues the appeal to his brethren cited earlier that they “*turn away* from [their] sins” by shaking off “the chains of him that would bind [them] fast” that they may “*come unto that God* who is the rock of [their] salvation” (2 Ne. 9:45). His call to repentance is built squarely on a Two Ways teaching, as he reminds them that “there is none other *way* [to salvation] save it be by the *gate*” that is kept by the Holy One of Israel. But “his *paths* are righteousness,” and “the *way* for man is narrow,” and “it lieth in a *straight course* before him” (2 Ne. 9:41).

**The Later Nephi.** After Lehi’s death and Jacob’s covenant oration in 2 Nephi 6–10, when Nephi seeks Old Testament support for his teachings, he goes to different passages of Isaiah than those used by the writers in Qumran and by the early Christians. One case of Isaiah’s use of the Two Ways teaching may signal Nephi’s chief source for the doctrine: “And many people shall go and say: Come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us of his *ways* and we will walk in his *paths*.” And further, “O house of Jacob, come ye and let us *walk in the light* of the Lord, yea, come, for ye have all *gone astray*, every one to his *wicked ways*” (2 Ne. 12:3, 5, quoting from Isa. 2). The same themes echo six chapters later where Nephi continues with Isaiah 8 and 9: “For the Lord spake thus to me with a strong hand

and instructed me that I should not *walk in the way* of this people . . . because there is *no light* in them.” But more optimistically he prophesies that “the people that *walked in darkness* have seen a *great light*. They that dwell in the land of *the shadow of death*, upon them hath *the light shined*” (2 Ne. 18:11, 20; 19:2, quoting Isa. 8:11, 20; 9:2).

Following the long section of chapters borrowed from Isaiah, Nephi undertakes his own final sermon to his righteous followers, but he concerns himself first with their future descendants who will become wicked. Nephi feels his teachings “are sufficient to teach any man the *right way*.” Twice he affirms that “the *right way* is to believe in Christ and deny him not.” By implication *the wrong way* is to deny Christ, by which they “also deny the prophets and the law” (2 Ne. 25:28–29). Having seen in vision the Lord’s punishments for these wicked descendants, Nephi is constrained to acknowledge to the Lord, “Thy *ways* are just” (2 Ne. 26:7). Nephi contrasts the fates of his wicked and righteous descendants and notes that “the righteous that hearken unto the words of the prophets . . . shall not perish.” Rather, the Lord will heal them and bless them with peace across three generations or more. But those who yield to “the devil and choose *works of darkness* rather than *light* . . . must go down to hell” (2 Ne. 26:8–10).

Nephi then goes on to describe the Two Ways in the last days by first describing the sins of the Gentiles and recognizing the devil as “the founder of all these things.” He is “the founder of murder and works of darkness—yea, and he *leadeth them* by the neck with a flaxen cord until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever.” Nephi goes on to contrast this with the Lord God who “worketh not in darkness. He doeth not any thing save it be for the benefit of the world, for he loveth the world.” Nephi then summarizes all the Lord has done for humanity and reemphasizes his invitation to all that come to him and repent and “partake of his salvation . . . [and] his goodness” (2 Ne. 26:20–33). Continuing this binary mode of analysis in his final sermon, Nephi describes the positive and the negative responses that will meet the restoration of the gospel in the last days and refers again to Abraham, whose seed will respond positively: “Jacob shall not now be ashamed . . . They shall sanctify my name and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and shall fear the God of Israel” (2 Ne. 27:28–35). By contrast, he describes the wicked in those days who have denied the Holy Ghost and have been seduced by the persuasions of the devil, who *leads them* carefully down to hell. He also distinguishes those who are built on the rock from various kinds of sinners who are built on a sandy foundation. But even though they will deny the Lord, he will still

be merciful “if they will repent and come unto [him].” The Doctrine of the Two Ways now distinguishes those “that fight against my word and against my people” from those who heed the Lord’s words (2 Ne. 28:32; 29:14). “For the time speedily cometh that the Lord God shall cause a great division among the people; and the wicked will he destroy and he will spare his people” (2 Ne. 30:10).

In the final section of his farewell sermon, Nephi presents his most complete explanation of “the doctrine of Christ,” which is “the *only way*” that leads to salvation in the kingdom of God. Using the image of a path and a gate, Nephi teaches that repentance and baptism are the *gate* by which all should enter. For those who have repented sincerely, the remission of sins will then come by fire and by the Holy Ghost, and they will then be in the “*straight and narrow path*” that leads to eternal life. And the Father will send the Holy Ghost to all who have “entered in by *the way*” (2 Ne. 31:17–21). Here Nephi has told us clearly that the Lord’s way is and has always been the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the ways of Satan are the many paths into which he leads those who follow him into sin. But Nephi can only hope for those who reconcile themselves unto Christ “and enter into the narrow *gate* and walk in the *straight path*<sup>37</sup> which leads *to life* and continue in the *path* until the end of the day of probation” (2 Ne. 33:9).

### Later Nephite Formulations of the Two Ways Doctrine

I have identified several additional passages in which a doctrine of Two Ways is explicitly taught, and over a hundred others that implicitly assume the logic of the Two Ways doctrine in promoting “the right way,” only a few of which will be mentioned here. Like Jacob, Lehi, and Nephi, some of these introduce new vocabulary, but none are so richly developed as those presented by the first generation of Nephite prophets. The binary logic of the Two Ways doctrine derives from repentance paraenesis in an eschatological context. All the family of Adam are headed for a final judgment where the wicked and the righteous will receive just rewards for the kind of lives they have chosen to live—the

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37. Skousen elected to use “strait” in this passage but acknowledged he could also have justified “straight,” which does seem to me to be the better choice. See his superb discussion of the strait/straight problem in the Book of Mormon in Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part One, 1 Nephi 1–2, Nephi 10* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2017), 174–81.

paths they have walked in mortality—by receiving eternal life in the presence of God, or being banished to hell with the devil and his other followers. Most preaching of repentance focuses on these two alternatives explicitly or implicitly and often employs the metaphor of two paths or ways of life that lead to one or the other of these eternal outcomes. The Book of Mormon story of Lehi and his progeny begins as he and other prophets are called to preach repentance to the apostate Jews in Jerusalem, warning them around 600 BCE of impending destruction and captivity if they will not turn back from their wicked ways to the Holy One of Israel. And the book will end over five hundred pages later with similar written calls to repentance addressed to the Gentiles and to the prophesied descendants of Lehi in a much later day.

**Benjamin.** In his own farewell, King Benjamin also chooses binary terminology to describe the lives of those who will be judged at the last day. For “there shall be no other name given *nor no other way* nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17). “Men drinketh damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children and believeth that salvation was and is and is to come in and through the atoning blood of Christ the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:18). Benjamin categorizes the Two Ways of *living* with new language: “For the *natural man* is an enemy to God and has been from the fall of Adam and will be forever and ever but if he yieldeth to the enticings of the Holy Spirit and putteth off the natural man and becometh a *saint* through the atonement of Christ the Lord and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19). Benjamin goes on to warn his people not to suffer their children “that they transgress the laws of God and fight and quarrel one with another and *serve the devil*, which is the master of sin, or which is *the evil spirit*, which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being *an enemy to all righteousness*. But ye will teach them to *walk in the ways of truth and soberness*; ye will teach them to love one another and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4:14–15). And the *ways of sin* are “so many that I cannot number them” (Mosiah 4:29).

Benjamin explicitly contrasts the “ways of truth and soberness” with the “ways of sin” and provides us with new and instructive labels for the people who may choose to walk either of them. The “natural man” is “an enemy to God” who has chosen to “serve the devil,” who is “an enemy to all righteousness” (Mosiah 3:19; 4:14). But through the Atonement

of Christ, another alternative has been provided. And God will entice his children through his Holy Spirit to “[put] off the natural man” and become “a saint” (Mosiah 3:19). For through the power of the Atonement of Christ, mankind can become as little children and learn “to walk in the ways of truth and soberness,” becoming “submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 4:15; 3:19).

**Nephi, the son of Helaman.** A few generations later the Nephites had fallen into great apostasy and “the more part of them had *turned out of the way of righteousness* and did trample under their feet the commandments of God and did turn unto their *own ways*” (Hel. 6:31). These would include “secret *plans*” or “*plans* of awful wickedness” (Hel. 11:26; 6:30). But at the same time, the Lamanites “did begin to keep his statutes and commandments and *to walk in truth and uprightness* before him” (Hel. 6:34).

**The Resurrected Jesus Christ.** When the Savior came to the Nephites after his crucifixion, he included in his teachings much of the New Testament Sermon on the Mount, including: “Enter ye in at the strait *gate*, for wide is the *gate* and broad is the *way* that leadeth to destruction. And many there be which go in thereat, because strait is the *gate* and narrow is the *way* which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (3 Ne. 14:13–14). While this formulation is consistent with the earlier Two Ways teaching of the Book of Mormon prophets, no distinctive features of this passage seem to show up in other Book of Mormon examples.<sup>38</sup>

**Moroni, the son of Mormon.** Moroni wrote that “in the gift of his Son hath God prepared a *more excellent way*” (Ether 12:11). For the benefit of the future Gentiles, Moroni summarizes in the concluding chapters of the Book of Mormon the measures that were taken in the Nephite church of Christ to keep their new converts “in the *right way*” (Moro. 6:4). Moroni goes on to include his father Mormon’s contrast between the ways of good and evil and explains that people cannot

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38. In his landmark publication on the Book of Mormon version of the Sermon on the Mount, John W. Welch recognized Two Ways doctrine not only in this passage, but also in the series of opposites employed throughout the sermon. See John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount: An Approach to 3 Nephi 11–18 and Matthew 5–7* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 62–63, 93, 243.

follow Christ and the devil at the same time, but must choose to follow one or the other. And *the way* to judge between them is plain. “The Spirit of Christ is given to every man that they may know good from evil” (Moro. 7:15–16).

## **Conclusions**

Consistent with their preexilic Hebrew Bible predecessors, the Book of Mormon prophets taught a version of the Two Ways doctrine that featured (1) invitations to repentance defined as turning or returning to God’s way, (2) the context of the Abrahamic covenant, (3) the blessings and cursings that would come from obedience or disobedience, and (4) the contrast of the path of righteousness that leads to life with the path of evil that leads to death. But this analysis has also produced a number of expansions or refinements of the Two Ways doctrine that are not reflected in biblical treatments of the Two Ways.

In this analysis of prominent Two Ways passages, I have identified numerous ways in which the Book of Mormon writers enriched and expanded the Two Ways doctrine as it occurred in preexilic writings of the Old Testament—the primary sources for this doctrine that would have been available to them in the plates of brass. In so doing, they relied mostly on the great revelations given to the early Nephite prophets, and especially on the visions in which they were taught about the coming Atonement of Jesus Christ and his gospel. The Nephite prophets continued to add new insights and vocabulary in their adaptations of the Two Ways doctrine as they taught their people—almost always in the mode of calling them to repentance. But even though their biblical sources were largely the same as the ones the Qumran writers and the early Christians drew on, they do not exhibit the developed rhetorical form or themes that Margaret McKenna identified in the Jewish and Christian texts from the Greco-Roman period. The Nephite prophets created a far richer and more highly developed language and system of explanations of the Doctrine of the Two Ways. But they do not seem to have adopted a standard rhetorical form for presenting it. Rather, successive authors tended to assume the contributions of their predecessors, while they felt free to add and extend that discourse as influenced by their own experience and inspiration.

It should be stressed again that these Book of Mormon passages constitute only a small group of the total number that appear to state or assume a Doctrine of the Two Ways. But they stood out for me as passages that offer new language or perspectives while at the same time

exhibiting some of the structure, function, and characteristic content of the biblical texts introduced in the opening sections of the paper. The Book of Mormon writers do refer to the ways of light and darkness, the ways of life and death, competing guides, the context of covenant, and the function of repentance paraenesis. But they also introduce a surprisingly large number of additional and fundamental notions that indicate significant originality and independence from even preexilic models. Most importantly, they meld together the Two Ways doctrine of the Abrahamic covenant and its promises of blessings to be received in this life with the Two Ways doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its promise of eternal life. And they do not display the formulaic patterns based on five specific antithetically structured themes that McKenna found evolving in the biblical and nonbiblical texts of Judaism and Christianity in the postexilic and Greco-Roman periods.

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