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The Language of Repentance in the Book of Mormon

Noel B. Reynolds

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Abstract

Efforts to understand the doctrine of repentance in the Book of Mormon have long been hampered by linguistic considerations—and especially the traditional translation provided in the King James Version of the Bible. Twentieth century studies provide a needed correction to this situation and open a wealth of potential new understandings of Book of Mormon discourse on repentance. Further, the discovery that the Book of Mormon uses the common biblical figure of speech of hendiadys repeatedly to expand and enrich the concept of repentance beyond biblical usage helps readers appreciate the ways in which repentance can be seen as the most central element of the gospel message in the Book of Mormon.

Preliminary considerations

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. 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. In contemporary English-speaking cultures, 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. While all these attitudes or actions are mentioned somewhere in the Book of Mormon, the Nephite prophets did not usually emphasize any of them when they spoke of repentance. Rather, their teachings about or calls to repentance described it as God’s invitation to all men and women to make or renew a covenant with him to take his name upon them and to keep his commandments.

Readers may also be surprised to learn that biblical scholarship has largely 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.”¹ The same may be true for Book of Mormon scholarship during the

¹ 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.

same period. There are many articles and books that quote the Book of Mormon on repentance and teach its importance. But I have not found any that attempt a comprehensive analysis of the concept as it would have been understood by the Nephites. The universal tendency is to explain the Book of Mormon teachings by reference to what is generally known from Christian traditions or the teachings of church leaders or to just assume that everyone already knows what it means. The findings of this paper call those assumptions into question and provide a more complete and coherent foundation for discourse that references Book of Mormon teachings about repentance.

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.² 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 feature of

Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical*, Oxford University Press, 2016. See also my review essay on these recent monographs: “Two New Studies of Biblical Repentance,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 27 (2017), 57-62.

² See the instructions of Alma to newly ordained priests in Mosiah 18:20.

Book of Mormon teaching. In this paper I will attempt a systematic examination of the language related to this prominent element of Nephite preaching.

It may also be surprising to most people of faith to learn how complex the scriptural concept of repentance really is. That complexity is reflected in continuing debates about appropriate translations for the vocabulary of repentance in both Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, debates which are informed both by competing theologies and etymologies. This inquiry into the concept or concepts of repentance taught in the Book of Mormon was motivated by the hope that it might offer simpler resolutions for the debates over biblical understandings. The findings were mixed. On the one hand, the Nephite concept of repentance turns out to be even more complex and rich than what is presented in the Bible. On the other hand, the Book of Mormon consistently relies on an explicit and stable set of background theological assumptions that provides a clear context for references to repentance. And further, the complexity and richness of the concept is repeatedly presented through the common biblical rhetorical form of *hendiadys* that provides a level of order and control for its interpretation that is not evident in the biblical text, though it appears to be fully compatible with that text.

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

Mormon.³ Abbreviated and full statements of this six-part gospel tend to lead with or emphasize the requirement of repentance.⁴ In 1996, I published a more detailed examination of the ways in which repentance is understood and taught in the Book of Mormon.⁵ 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, while it deeply enriches the Book of Mormon’s version of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While the New Testament is not irrelevant to this inquiry, Book of Mormon writers claimed no access to it, and for reasons of space, it will not be included. The following analysis will also explicate the evident centrality of repentance in that six-element gospel as taught by the Nephite prophets.

³ See Noel B. Reynolds, “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.

⁴ See Noel B. Reynolds, “Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (Spring, 2017), 106–134.

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

The overall finding of the first half of this paper is that with few exceptions⁶ Book of Mormon discussions of repentance are fully compatible with the prominent use of the Hebrew verb *shub* that scholars have identified in the Old Testament. The Nephites repeatedly speak of repentance as turning or returning to God—to walk with him in his way, in the path of righteousness. Nephi had labeled repentance and baptism as the gate by which believers could enter the covenant path that leads to eternal life. This explains why the gospel or doctrine of Christ is referred to even more frequently in Book of Mormon discourse as *the path* or *the way*.⁷ And it helps us understand why the Book of Mormon prophets relied so

⁶ Hebraist Matthew L. Bowen has demonstrated that there are also passages in the Book of Mormon where the Hebrew *naham* would seem to be the likely underlying term for discussions of repentance as regret or stories of giving comfort. He offers Alma’s descriptions of the anguish he suffered for his sins in Mosiah 23:9–10 and again in Alma 36:12–14. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘This Son Shall Comfort Us’: An Onomastic Tale of Two Noahs,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017), pp. 263–298.

⁷ In Noel B. Reynolds, “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 message of salvation, the metaphorical language of ways, paths, or roads is used 108 times.

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

A Note on Methodology

Any attempt to compare the language of the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon will in the final analysis remain speculative at some level. While scholars have identified numerous Hebraisms and rhetorical structures that point plausibly to Hebrew as its underlying source, we have the Book of Mormon only in an English version.¹⁰ A range of tentative theoretical descriptions of the translation

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.

¹⁰ John A. Tevedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Survey,” *BYU Studies* 11, No. 1 (1970), 1–10, provides a brief listing of the most important Hebraisms that had been identified 50 years ago. More recently, distinctive Hebrew rhetorical structures have been

process have been advanced over the years, but none of these are sufficiently complete or coherent to provide guidance for the comparisons I will be making in this essay. Recognizing these limitations, I will rely on observable similarities and differences in the terminology and semantics of Old Testament and Book of Mormon passages featuring the concept of repentance as guides to understanding how the Nephite prophets understood the principle.

Repentance in Translations of the Hebrew Bible¹¹

Translators of the Old Testament have used *repent/repentance* as the translation of two different Hebrew words — *naham* and *shub*. The KJV translates

identified in the Book of Mormon text including most recently in Noel B. Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in “*To Seek the Law of the Lord:*” *Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson, The Interpreter Foundation, 2017, 333–349.

¹¹ The Hebrew words used in this article have been transliterated, or Romanized, meaning they have been converted from the original Hebrew letters into the Roman (Latin) letters used in the English alphabet. Scholars have devised, over the years, various systems of transliteration of the Biblical Hebrew script, in order to preserve distinctive characteristics of ancient Hebrew pronunciation. The level of precision used when transliterating often depends on the purposes of the given article, what is needed for argumentation, and the intended audience. This article will use a more basic phonetic system of transliteration so that the converted Hebrew words will be accessible to the widest audience possible. So, for example, the Hebrew word נָחַם could be rendered more precisely as *nāḥam* to preserve the vowel sound markings and the pharyngeal fricative *ḥet*. Because this “h” sound is somewhat foreign to English speakers, it is sometimes represented by “ch” or “kh,” and the word is, thus, sometimes transliterated as *nacham* or *nakham*. For the sake of accessibility and simplicity, we will represent the word as simply *naham*.

forms of the Hebrew *naham* 38 times as *repent/repentance*. Dictionaries list the following primary meanings for *naham*: (1) to be sorry, regret, repent and (2) to comfort or be comforted.¹² As will be shown below, today’s scholars generally agree that the 17th century translators may have been unduly influenced by the Christian traditions regarding penance in this choice and should have recognized the much more common verb *shub* as the root notion of repentance in the Old Testament.¹³ *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and*

¹² The transliteration *naham* is based on the Hebrew original נחם (to be sorry, regret, repent), which can also be transliterated as *nāham*, *nacham*, or *nakham*.

¹³ In a recent article that offers a comprehensive definition of repentance grounded in Latter-day Saint scriptures and teachings, Loren and Tina Spendlove provide a useful survey of the Hebrew and Greek terminology underlying the biblical usage. See their article “Turning to the Lord with the Whole Heart: The Doctrine of Repentance in the Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016), 177–246. One principal difference between their approach and mine lies in their interpretation of biblical calls to turn or turn back as metaphorical references to man’s “natural state” of innocence in the Garden of Eden before the fall rather than to the dominant context of the paths or ways laid out for man in God’s commandments. The Spendloves propose that the rabbinic term *teshuva* provides a more suitable Hebrew background concept for repentance in Latter-day Saint scriptures. Since then, David Lambert has raised some serious issues with that strategy by showing how *teshuva* is really a product of the later Hellenistic culture that had already moved on from the old Hebrew

Exegesis (NIDOTTE) article on *shub* recognizes *naham* as a synonym that can underscore “the personal relationship of God and people” when the verb means to “be sorry, change one’s mind,” and “nuances the emotional dimension of remorse in making a change.” Significantly, “the root *nḥm*, . . . while used frequently with God, is used sparingly of persons.”¹⁴

The primary meaning for *shub* as a verb of motion is “to turn or return.” It is the 12th most frequently used verb in the Old Testament with over 1050 occurrences, the large majority of which are non-metaphorical. In its negative forms it is translated metaphorically as “backsliding” or “rebellion/apostasy.” While there are several idioms that refer to aspects of repentance, these are all “subsumed and summarized by this one verb *shûb*.¹⁵ Far better than any other verb it combines in itself the two requisites of repentance: to turn from evil and to turn

shub to the new Greek *metanoëo* and *metanoia*. See David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical*, Oxford University Press, 2016, 178–191.

¹⁴ J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, “שׁוּב[*shûb*, 8740],” *NIDOTTE* (1997), 4:57.

¹⁵ The transliteration *shub* is based on the Hebrew original שׁוּב (to turn back, return, repent), which can also be transliterated as *šub*, *shûb*, *shuwb*, or *shuv*.

to the good.”¹⁶ In his 1958 dissertation at the University of Leiden, William L. Holladay explored all the relevant metaphorical uses of the various forms of *shub* in the Old Testament and cognate literatures and determined that most (164) of its many occurrences should be understood as covenantal. While an obvious interpretation of many of these passages would be “change one’s loyalty by turning to God,” Holladay argued that most of these should be interpreted in the context of an assumed previously established or already existing covenant, leading to such translations as “return to God,” or “turn back to God.”¹⁷ It was also used to mean “return from exile,” which could obviously be associated with a return to the covenant. “A return from exile was reclamation as much as a return from any form of sin. That God should permit either return is corroborative of his covenantal faithfulness [*hesed*].”¹⁸

¹⁶ Victor P. Hamilton in his entry on *shub* in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (editors), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980, 909.

¹⁷ William L. Holladay, *The Root šûbh in the Old Testament with Particular Reference to its Usages in Covenantal Contexts*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958, 116–120.

¹⁸ Hamilton, 909. For a more detailed discussion of God’s covenantal faithfulness or *hesed*, see Noel B. Reynolds, *The Covenant Concept in the Book of Mormon*, working paper, All Faculty Publications, BYU ScholarsArchive, August 20, 2018, 11–12. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2176/>. The transliteration *hesed* is based on the Hebrew original חֶסֶד (favor/grace, lovingkindness, mercy), which can also be transliterated as *hesed*, *chesed*, *checed*, or *khesed*.

Bible scholars today agree that the Hebrew root *shub* (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 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.¹⁹ The later biblical texts that scholars refer to as having been produced by the Priestly source sometimes speak in terms of remorse (*asham*) and confession (*todah*).²⁰ While different in formulation, the prophetic concept retains the central teaching that “man’s repentance is a prerequisite for divine forgiveness.”²¹ In his 2001 study, George Ossom-Batsa concluded that *shub* 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.

¹⁹ Jacob Milgrom, “The Priestly Doctrine of Repentance,” *Revue Biblique* 82 (1975), 186–205 at 202-203.

²⁰ The transliteration *asham* is based on the Hebrew original אָשָׁם (offense, guilt, remorse), which can also be transliterated as *ashām*, *ashāh*, or *asham*. The transliteration *todah* is based on the Hebrew original תָּדָה (confession, thanksgiving, praise), which can also be transliterated as *tôdâ*, *tôwdāh*, *toda*, *towda*, or *towdah*.

²¹ Milgrom, 204.

Finally, YHWH's potential forgiveness is always available to sinners who confess their sins."²²

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 prophets."²³ Nephi emphasizes the same point in his foundational presentation of the doctrine of Christ:

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, . . . then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost. (2 Nephi 31:13)²⁴

Milgrom goes on to describe the prophetic concept of repentance:

²² George Ossom-Batsa, "The Theological Significance of the Root *šwb* in Jeremiah," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, August 2001, Vol. 39, No. 2, 232.

²³ 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.

²⁴ All quotations from the Book of Mormon text are taken from the Yale critical edition. Italics are added to draw readers' attention to key words in the argument. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009.

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, *shûb*, “turn/return.” This root combines 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.²⁵

Milgrom’s long-standing focus on *shub* as the principal Hebrew term for repentance is strongly confirmed in David A. Lambert’s more recent study of the evolution of the concept in biblical religions. Lambert recognizes that these other

²⁵ Milgrom, “Excursus,” 397.

Hebrew concepts related to the “penitential self” (submission, humility, remorse) have been suggested as synonyms for *repentance* 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 [*shûb*] 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.”²⁶

Lambert helpfully points out that the etymology of *shub* 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 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 or penitential context. Rather, he finds the first evolution of the term in that direction in oracular contexts where Israel is accused 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.²⁷

While Lambert finds the earliest prophets Amos and Hosea using *shub* 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” is not just an issue of inquiring or appealing. Rather it suggests a policy of relying on a 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 *shub*-related and that Isaiah’s concern

²⁶ Lambert, 71.

²⁷ Lambert, 77

focuses on “the question of dependence, that they should turn to their God rather than relying on other locales of power.”²⁸

Continuing his analysis of the evolution of meanings for *shub* 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 or covenantal) relationship (e.g., Jeremiah 3:6–7, 12), and 2) the cessation of sin. “It is impossible to find the *shûb* of cessation of sin before Jeremiah, and nearly impossible to find anything but it after him.”²⁹ But Lambert strongly resists the conclusion that *shub* 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

²⁸ Lambert, 82.

²⁹ Lambert, 86.

taken up around the turn of the Common Era, within emerging forms of Judaism and Christianity, as a practice of subjective control for shaping communal discipline and defining communal boundaries.³⁰

This transition in repentance terminology was described in other words in *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*: “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.”³¹

Repentance in the Book of Mormon

Faith and repentance linked together

It is not difficult to find echoes of Lambert’s “*shub* 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. It should be remembered in this regard that trusting in the Lord was viewed as the covenantal duty of his people; as will be more fully explained below, it is clearly a covenant concept in both the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon:

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

³⁰ Lambert, 9.

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 Nephi 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 shall hearken unto the precepts of men, save their 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)

³¹ 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.

The integral connection of faith or trust in the Lord and repentance is quite clear in these passages.³² It is only by relying on or trusting in the arm of the Lord and his strength that a person 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,³³ and Amulek 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-fold repetition of this unique phrase, Amulek 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

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

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 as understood in the first Nephite generation

The opening scene of the Book of Mormon portrays the first year of the 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 revelations, which featured

³³ 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

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 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 choose 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.”³⁴

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.³⁵ 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 Nephi 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 Nephi 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 Nephi 31:13, 14). So, “the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:17). Through repentance and baptism, the person has entered on the “straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life.”

³⁴ 2 Nephi 2:21–27.

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, which 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

³⁵ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel according to Nephi,” *Religious Educator* 16 (no. 2, 2015), 51–75.

remission of sins and provides the essential guide each person must follow to stay on the true path, (4) *enduring to the end* as a description of the life of obedience through which the Lord can shape and sanctify each of his covenant people, that they may become like him and be prepared to enter his presence, and (5) the promise of salvation or eternal life that is frequently included in these passages.³⁶

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 Nephi 9:23). For "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 Nephi 9:24). Because of the fall, all 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 our 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

³⁶ See Reynolds, "The Gospel according to Mormon" and "Biblical Merismus."

endless torment” (2 Nephi 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 Nephi 9:38).

Moving to a conclusion, Jacob again invokes the ancient doctrine of the two ways and pleads with his wayward 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 Nephi 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 Nephi 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: 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 enables divine deliverance and leads to human joy and salvation.³⁷ And the choice all men and women 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

Repentance, then, is a choice with a covenant 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 as steps in the repentance process. Though repentance is usually characterized as a turning or turning back from wrong paths to the correct one, the emphasis on every individual’s freedom to choose the way he or she will go could also portray repentance as a change of mind

³⁷ S. Kent Brown, “Alma’s Conversion: Reminiscences in His Sermons,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of the Word*, edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., 341–156, reviews Alma’s eight principal sermons and shows how Alma links the Lord’s deliverances of his people in both recent and ancient history with his memory of the deliverance from Satan and sin in his own conversion experience.

³⁸ Chauncey C. Riddle has given us a profound explanation of how to understand the new and everlasting covenant as the covenant made when we repent. See Chauncey C. Riddle, “The Two Covenants,” *Religious Educator* 3, No. 3 (2002), 141–149.

³⁹ See 2 Nephi 31 and the papers listed in note 3 above.

or conversion 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 doctrine of the two ways so much more frequently and more richly explained than does the Bible or other ancient texts.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Reynolds, "Ancient Doctrine."

Corporate and individual repentance and salvation

Another striking feature of repentance preaching in the Book of Mormon is the continual jumping back and forth between the need for individuals to repent if 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.⁴¹ But for both corporate Israel and for individuals, the concept of repentance is the same. As Nephi concludes his review of these prophecies and prepares to present the gospel of Christ in his final sermon, he makes clear that corporate salvation cannot be separated from individual salvation:

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 Nephite prophets understood repentance. Amulek’s unique phrase, *faith unto repentance*, occurs four times in chapter 34, but nowhere else in all of scripture.⁴² Alma and other prophets employ a different, but closely related rhetorical structure to make the same point about

⁴¹ See Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018), 39–74.

⁴² See the thoughtful study of this phrase in Jennifer C. Lane, “Faith unto Repentance: The Fulness of the Simple Way,” in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon*, BYU Religious Studies Center, 2003, 181–193.

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 (hendiadys) is “very frequently used in both the Old and New Testaments,” and that it “is one of the most important in the Bible.”⁴³ Almost a century later, in his widely acclaimed updating of Bullinger’s Greek and Latin-oriented work from 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.”⁴⁴ 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 possibilities for rich meaning—using it over 300

⁴³ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*, reprinted 1968 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House), 657, published originally in London in 1898. For modern writers in English, Fowler has described a hendiadys as “the expressing of a compound notion by giving its two constituents as though they were independent and connecting them with a conjunction instead of subordinating one to the other.” H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, second edition revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 245.

⁴⁴ 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.

times in his plays and 66 times where the rhetorical form itself becomes thematic in *Hamlet*.⁴⁵

Because rhetorical forms are not widely taught these days, hendiadyses may not be readily recognized or understood by contemporary readers. In its simplest form, two nouns or verbs of the same case or tense are conjoined by a conjunction (usually *and*) to signal a deeper unity of meaning that is emphasized and informed 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).⁴⁶ The meaning of the combined phrase is that God’s love is dependable because he embodies truth and is unchanging.⁴⁷ This point made implicitly in these Old Testament hendiadyses is endorsed explicitly by Nephi in the context of a hendiadys featuring repentance:

The Holy Ghost . . . is the gift of God . . . as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself . . . for he is the same yesterday and today and forever. And the way is prepared for all men from the foundation

⁴⁵ George T. Wright, “Hendiadys and *Hamlet*,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 96, No. 2 (March 1981), 168–193.

⁴⁶ The transliteration ‘*emet* is based on the Hebrew original אֱמֶת (firmness, faithfulness, truth), which can also be transliterated as ‘*ēmet*, ‘*emet*, ‘*emeth*, or *emeth*.

⁴⁷ See the explanation in Lester J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth,” *Reformed Review* 16 (no. 1, 1962), 4.

of the world if it so be that they *repent and come unto him*. . . The mysteries of God shall be unfolded . . . by the power of the Holy Ghost as well in this time as in times of old and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore the course of the Lord is one eternal round. (1 Nephi. 10:17–19)

So, while the two key words linked in a hendiadys do have their own independent meanings and usage, their conjunction points to and emphasizes an additional range of shared meaning.⁴⁸ The conjunction is understood to be inclusive and not merely additive. In this final section of the paper, apparently unique Book of Mormon hendiadyses that feature repentance and its rich array of meanings are presented and examined.

1. *Repent and believe*

The close connection between belief (faith) and repentance is clearly signaled in several non-hendiadys statements: “If thou repent of all thy sins . . . and

⁴⁸ 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 and other scholarly writings recognize as a genuine rhetorical figure in the Hebrew Bible. 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 Hebrew Bible 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 her misgivings, I will use the term here while respecting these caveats and clarifications and leave the unresolved labeling problem to the rhetoricians.

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).
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 in context 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ Three of the clear-cut hendiadyses in the foregoing list are also parts of longer meristic statements of the gospel—giving us examples of hendiadyses embedded in larger figures of speech.

While the concurrence of *repent/repentance* and *believe/faith* 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 hendiadyses signals 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

⁴⁹ Cf. 2 Nephi 9:23, Ether 4:18, and Moroni 7:34.

⁵⁰ See Reynolds, “Biblical Merismus.”

belief in him. But the reversed sequence in these hendiadyses suggests strongly that something else is going on.

That “something else” is readily explained by reference to the Old Testament concept of faith in the context of Israel’s covenant with YHWH as it has been developed in the writings of Bible scholars over the last half century. As Gordon Wenham has explained, faith or belief in God involves obedience to the divine commands just as disobedience is linked to unbelief in the Old Testament. “Wherever a covenant between God and man is involved one may say that faith in this full-blooded sense is the obligation placed on the human party. . . . It is a total reliance on God as one who is completely truthful and dependable.”⁵¹ So the Nephite hendiadys imperative to “repent and believe” can be restated in this way: “Forsake your wicked ways and take up the Lord’s way by covenant and continue in that path by obeying his commandments.” Understanding faith or belief in that way explains why the Nephite gospel includes “endurance of faith on his name to the end” as its fifth principle (Moroni 3:3, 8:3).⁵²

⁵¹ Gordon Wenham, “Faith in the Old Testament,” typescript of three 1975/1976 lectures, copy in author’s possession, Theological Student’s Fellowship, pp. 4–5. For a full development of this approach in a Book of Mormon context see Noel B. Reynolds, “Faith and Faithfulness in the Book of Mormon,” June 4, 2019, working paper available online at ScholarsArchive...

⁵² Noel B. Reynolds, “The Fifth Principle of the Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 15, No. 3 (2014), 117–127.

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 similar examples—which turns out to be the case.⁵³ 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 hendiadyses 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 doctrinal 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

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

baptism, which they saw as a witness to God and to the people that they had repented:⁵⁴

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

⁵⁴ 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 through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly*, 51, No. 2 (2012), 4–37.

people, who had to defer that culminating witness 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 are expressed as hendiadyses—thereby employing that same figure of speech to incorporate one more essential gospel element into the Nephite notion of repentance:

1. “He commandeth all men that they must *repent and be baptized* in his name” (2 Nephi 9:23).
2. “The Father saith: Repent ye, *repent ye, and be baptized* in the name of my Beloved Son” (2 Nephi 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 Nephi 11:38).
5. “Those *who repent and are baptized* in my name” (3 Nephi 18:11).
6. “Among my people *which do repent and are baptized* in my name” (3 Nephi 18:16).
7. “Therefore, *repent and be baptized* in the name of Jesus” (Mormon 7:8).
8. “This thing shall ye teach— *repentance and baptism*” (Moroni 8:10).

9. “Teach parents that *they must repent and be baptized*” (Moroni 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 was⁵⁵ 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)

⁵⁵ While strange sounding to modern ears, scholars recognize the recurring use of singular verb forms with compound subjects in classical Hebrew texts. See, Lillas, 18–19.

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 Nephi 31:7–8). That this “humbling” and “witnessing” refers to repentance and baptism when applied to Christ’s followers is made clear by 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 Nephi 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 hendiadyses 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 Nephi 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 Nephi 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 with the command or invitation to come unto him.⁵⁶ The Nephite idea of repentance includes this notion of entering into the covenant path that leads to Christ and explains the numerous passages that link the invitations to repent and to come unto him, the following 16 of which are formulated as hendiadyses.

⁵⁶ 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*, 31 (2019), 1–22.

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 Nephi 10:18).
2. “Nevertheless I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God, if they will *repent and come* unto me” (2 Nephi 28:32).
3. “I beseech of you . . . that ye would *repent and come* with full purpose of heart” (Jacob 6:5).
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 Nephi 9:22).
6. “Therefore *repent and come* unto me” (3 Nephi 9:22).
7. “Ye shall *repent . . . and come* unto me” (3 Nephi 12:19).
8. “For ye know not but what they will . . . *repent and come* unto me” (3 Nephi 18:32).
9. “That they may *repent and come* unto me” (3 Nephi 21:6).
10. “Whosoever will not *repent and come* unto my Beloved Son” (3 Nephi 21:20).
11. “This is the commandment: *repent . . . and come* unto me” (3 Nephi 27:20).
12. “*Repent . . . and come* unto me” (3 Nephi 30:2).

13. “Cry unto this people: *Repent ye and come* unto me” (Mormon 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” (Moroni 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 given to them. The repeated conjunction of these two verbs exemplifies perfectly the pattern of hendiadys as described above in that the pairing evokes further meaning beyond which either verb would convey on its own.

Coming unto him should not 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. And it is the Lord himself who keeps the gate at the end of that path and opens the gate for the faithful. As Jacob explained:

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. And whoso knocketh to him will he open. (2 Nephi 9:41–42)

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. All of this was implied in the simple Nephite hendiadys *repent and come unto me*.

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 *shub*, 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 repetitive imperatives as hendiadyses.⁵⁷ The same pattern recurs frequently in the Book of Mormon, suggesting again the likelihood that *shub* may be the underlying term used for

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Ezekiel 14:6 and 18:30 where both the KJV and NIV translations use *repent* and *return* to translate the repeated *shûb* terms.

repentance by the Nephite prophets. The clearest examples follow, beginning with Nephi, 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? (Helaman 7:17)

Less poetic are another dozen examples that feature the rhetorical 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” (Mosiah 11:23).
3. “Except they *repent . . . and turn* to me” (Alma 3:14).
4. “Perhaps they will *repent and turn* unto thee” (Helaman 11:4).
5. “But if ye will *repent and return* unto the Lord” (Helaman 13:11).
6. “Will ye not now *return unto me and repent*” (3 Nephi 9:13)?
7. “If ye will *repent and return* unto me” (3 Nephi 10:6)!
8. “If the Gentiles will *repent and return* unto me” (3 Nephi 16:13).
9. “They will *return and repent*” (3 Nephi 18:32).
10. “*Turn . . . and repent* of your evil doings” (3 Nephi 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” (Mormon 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 *repent* conjoined with *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 people may 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.⁵⁸

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 forgiveness, 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

⁵⁸ Cf. Larry E. Dahl, “The Doctrine of Christ,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989, 360.

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 appears to 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*” (Helaman 11:9).

4. “Therefore *repent ye and humble yourselves* before him” (Mormon 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 Nephi 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. In addition to these last four passages, another 32 passages link the hardening of hearts to the need for repentance.⁵⁹ Nephi had specifically contrasted his experience of having his heart “softened” by the Holy Spirit with the resistance of his older brothers who would not hearken to his words “because of the hardness of their hearts” (1 Nephi 2:16–18). Moshe Weinfeld has shown that in Deuteronomy, covenant fidelity begins

⁵⁹ These references are found in the following passages and are sometimes repeated in the same passage: 1 Nephi 2:18, 7:8, 14:7, 15:3, 4, 10, 11, 17:19, 30, 46, 2 Nephi 1:17, 2 Nephi 25:12, Jacob 1:15, Jarom 1:3, Mosiah 13:32, Alma 13:4, 14:11, 16:17, 22:22, 30:29, 30:46, 35:15, 48:3, Helaman 13:8, 3 Nephi 2:1, 7:16, 17, Mormon 3:12, Ether 4:15, 15:19, and Moroni 9:10.

with the heart and not with external actions or rituals.⁶⁰ In Old Testament texts, the heart is often referred to as turning to or away from the Lord, by repenting or rebelling.⁶¹

6. *Hardness of heart and blindness of mind*

The need for repentance is also depicted in the related metaphor of spiritual blindness that occurs eight times in the Old Testament—which Isaiah invokes more than others, but which is never linked directly to hardness of heart in that text:

Blindness is also a metaphor for confusion or spiritual insensitivity.

Covenant disobedience will cause one to stagger like a blind man (Deut 28:29; cf. Lam 4:14; Zeph 1:17). Israel, whose history was marked by such defection, is therefore described as blind (Isa 59:10), a servant people whose spiritual sight has been lost (42:18, 19; 43:8). Her very watchmen (i.e., her prophets) have, ironically, lost their capacity to watch by virtue of having become blind to truth (56:10, emphasis added).⁶²

This metaphor of spiritual blindness does occur many times in the Book of Mormon, but here it is the mind, not the eyes, that is blinded. And it only occurs

⁶⁰ Moshe Weinfeld, “Covenant Terminology,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973), 190–99.

⁶¹ See the full discussion in Alex Luc, “לב, [leb, lebab, heart]” *NIDOTTE* 2:749–754.

once by itself when Zeezrom recognizes “the blindness of the minds which he had caused among the people by his lying words” (Alma 14:6). But it shows up ten more times linked to hard hearts in the hendiadys form suggesting a more complex idea of resistance to the Spirit (1 Nephi 2:16–18) combined with mental attachment to lies or falsehoods—both being understood as choices made by rebellious persons:

1. “Ye are so *hard in your hearts* and so *blind in your minds*” (1 Nephi 7:8).
2. “Deliverance of them to the *hardness of their hearts* and *blindness of their minds*” (1 Nephi 14:7).
3. “They *hardened their hearts* and *blinded their minds*” (1 Nephi 17:30).
4. “The *hardness of their hearts* . . . and the *blindness of their minds*” (Jarom 1:3).
5. “The *hardness of their hearts* and *blindness of their minds*” (Alma 13:4).
6. “He had *hardened the hearts* of the Lamanites and *blinded their minds*” (Alma 48:3).

⁶² R. K. Harrison and E. H. Merrill, “יָוָו[iwwer, blind],” NIDOTTE 5:356.

7. “Began to be *hard in their hearts* and *blind in their minds*” (3 Nephi 2:1).
8. “Being grieved for the *hardness of their hearts* and the *blindness of their minds*” (3 Nephi 7:16).
9. “Your . . . *hardness of heart* and *blindness of mind*” (Ether 4:15).
10. “They were given up unto the *hardness of their hearts* and the *blindness of their minds*” (Ether 15:19).

While two of these (1 and 7) do not conform to the strict 19th century academic definition of hendiadys by featuring adjectival rather than nominal or verbal forms of the paired terms, it would seem doubtful that the author of those lines did not see himself employing the same rhetorical structure that informed these other instances. And there are other passages where the authors seem to manipulate the same linkage creatively for rhetorical effect and further enrichment of the meaning:

And there was no inequality among them, for the Lord did pour out his Spirit on all the face of the land for *to prepare the minds* of the children of men or *to prepare their hearts* to receive the word . . . that they might *not be*

hardened against the word, that they might *not be unbelieving*. (Alma 16:16–17)⁶³

Another example of that creative impulse is evident in item #4 in the list above in that Jarom actually links two additional spiritual failings (deafness of their ears and stiffness of their necks) with the standard two, making his long figure into a hendiatetris, which fourfold figure also occurs rarely in the Old Testament: “It is expedient that much should be done among this people because of the *hardness of their hearts* and the *deafness of their ears* and the *blindness of their minds* and the *stiffness of their necks*” (Jarom 1:3). Bible 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 *hendiatriis* and *hendiatetris*.⁶⁴ Clearly, the Nephites had a well-developed rhetorical discourse as they called sinners to repentance and taught the obedient how to stay faithful to the covenant path.

7. *Other possible examples of repentance-based hendiadyses*

The foregoing analysis of hendiadyses featuring *repent/repentance* should be more than enough to demonstrate the extraordinary richness of that concept in

⁶³ Cf. Jacob 3:1, 2, and 3; Mosiah 2:9; 7:33; and Alma 39:13.

⁶⁴ See the discussion that begins in Lillas, p. 247.

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 Mormon 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 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. 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 should be taken in the rhetorical 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 hendiadys in which each of the multiple elements is intended to require a reinterpretation of the other terms, pointing to enriched or expanded meanings of *repentance*.

Conclusions

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 Book of Mormon repentance terminology most likely aligns with the Hebrew *shub*, the use of the rhetorical figure of hendiadys shows a much richer conjunction with other concepts. The Nephites understood repentance to include more than simply 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 presence of the Lord. 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 demonstrates that the Nephites could think of the six

gospel elements in terms of a list, this initial study of *repentance* hendiadyses 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.

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