Chapter 76

Getting Things Strai[gh]t

3 Nephi 14:13 "Enter ye in at the strait gate."

In Matthew 7:13 and 3 Nephi 14:13 we read, "Enter ye in at the *strait* gate." It is interesting to consider the meaning of the word "strait" in these texts, and to note the differences between the English words *strait* and *straight.*

In contemporary English, *straight,* of course, usually means "not crooked," but the word *strait* is not often used. The main meaning of this somewhat archaic word is "narrow," as in the Straits of Gibraltar. Thus the "strait gate" (Greek, *stenēs pulēs*) is a narrow gate. This meaning is evident in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Sermon at the Temple, since he clearly contrasts the narrow gate and the tribulation-filled path (Greek, *tethlimmenē*) with their opposites, the broad gate and large and spacious (*euruchōros*) way. The meaning of *strai[gh]t,* however, is not always so evident in other passages in the Book of Mormon. Spellings have varied from one edition to the next, and sometimes people have wondered which is correct. Research indicates that both spellings and a range of meanings in several cases may be possible.

Going back to the 1829 manuscripts of the Book of Mormon, one finds that the word *strait* appears over twenty times in the Printer's Manuscript (1 Nephi 8:20; 10:8; 16:23; 21:20; 2 Nephi 4:33; 9:41; 31:18-19; 33:9; Jacob 6:11; Alma 7:9, 19; 37:12, 44; 50:8; 56:37; Helaman 3:29; 3 Nephi 14:13-14; 27:33), but the spelling "straight" was never used there. When Joseph Smith said the word *strai[gh]t,* Oliver Cowdery apparently always preferred to spell it "s-t-r-a-i-t."

The only known instance when Oliver Cowdery spelled the word s-t-r-a-i-g-h-t on the Original Manuscript was in Alma 50:8 ("the land of Nephi did run in a strai[gh]t course from the east sea to the west"), but even there he changed it to s-t-r-a-i-t when he copied it over for the printer. Likewise, when Nephi made an arrow out of a straight stick in 1 Nephi 16:23, Oliver wrote"s-t-r-a-i-t." Oliver's spelling is understandable, since the dictionaries of

the early nineteenth century, such as Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language,* show both spellings as being somewhat interchangeable.

This creates a slight challenge, however, for readers of the Book of Mormon. Sometimes, one must consider the word *strai[gh]t* in context to think what it might mean. For example, the text speaks of a "strai[gh]t and narrow path" (1 Nephi 8:20; 2 Nephi 31:18-19; Helaman 3:29). There are several possible meanings here:

1. This expression may contain an emphatic redundancy, that is, a "narrow [strait] and narrow path." Hebrew writers did not shun such repetitions.

2. It might mean "straight," that is, not crooked. This meaning is attested elsewhere in scriptures affirming that God does not walk in crooked paths (see Alma 7:20).

3. It may also mean "difficult or stressful." The path of righteousness is not an easy one (see 2 Nephi 31:19-20), but it is full of tribulation (see Matthew 7:13; compare Acts 14:22, where the same Greek word meaning tribulation appears; compare also "straitening" in 1 Nephi 17:41).

4. Or it may mean "tight," being "pressed together, crowded" (for a similar notion, see 1 Nephi 8:21).

5. Or again, it might also mean "upright" or "righteous," that is, morally straight. Several scriptures admonish us in this sense to walk "uprightly" before the Lord (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 16:3; Psalms 15:2).

6. Other possible meanings include "close, in the sense of intimate," "strict, rigorous, or disciplined" (compare "strict" in 2 Nephi 4:32); "distressed or perplexed," or even "pressed to poverty."

All these were meanings of the words *straight* and *strait* in Joseph Smith's day. Although one cannot know which of these meanings may have been known to the Prophet, they all have potential applications especially to the meaning of the "strai[gh]t and narrow path" that Lehi saw.

In addition, the English words *straight* and *strait* are used in the King James Version of the Old Testament as translations for several Hebrew words. Understanding something of their range of meaning in Hebrew may also shed light on the thoughts that writers like Isaiah, Lehi, and Nephi may have intended to convey. For example, Isaiah says, "Make straight [*yashar*] in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3). Together with its primary meaning of "straight," another meaning of the Hebrew word *yashar* is "level, smooth" (Zechariah 4:7; 1 Kings 20:23; Psalms 26:12). Moreover, the ancient Greek translations of this passage use the word *euthus,* meaning straight, whether horizontally or vertically; and both ideas are present in Isaiah 40:4, describing the Lord's highway as straight (*yashar*) and plain (*biqᶜah*).

Thus, if Lehi used the same terminology as Isaiah, in addition to the meanings mentioned above, Lehi's "straight and narrow path" may also be thought of as a *"smooth*[or level] and narrow path." This Hebrew meaning is especially consistent with Nephi's plea to the Lord: "Make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way" (2 Nephi 4:33). Nephi's straight path is a "plain road," a smooth and "clear" path in the low valley (2 Nephi 4:32), which is "straight" because it is smooth, unobstructed with stumbling blocks.

These meanings open to our spiritual understanding a number of possible insights. By considering the possible meanings on several occasions when the word "strai[gh]t" appears in the Book of Mormon, we may discern more specifically the many ways the text may apply to us today.

Based on research by John W. Welch and Daniel McKinlay, January 1989.