

Two Ways

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In ancient Israel travel by foot was often treacherous due to the terrain and deficient public safety. The book of Proverbs adopts this reality as a metaphor about life. Daniel P. Bricker comments:

In a society that traveled primarily on foot the metaphor of the path or way functioned as an illustration of everyday living. The importance of making good choices on a journey through a wilderness was obvious. The wrong choice could lead at best to delays until the proper path could be relocated and at worst to becoming hopelessly lost and victimized by predators or bandits, and possibly death. In this light "to stumble") is one of the most serious consequences of walking on the wrong path.

A useful depiction of the metaphor is 4:10—19.

- (10) Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many.
- (11) I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
- (12) When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble.
- (13) Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.
- (14) Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil.
- (15) Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.
- (16) For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.
- (17) For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.
- (18) But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.
- (19) The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what They stumble.

This passage contrasts the two paths—positive and negative—that lie before mankind. Many of the comparisons and contrasts can be summarized this way:

Path	way of wisdom paths of uprightness	way of the evil path of the wicked way of the wicked done wrong, made someone stumble, wickedness, violence
Preparation	my words, words of wisdom, instruction	
Benefit	years of your life may be many, step will not be hampered, not stumble, life	
Destination	light of dawn which shines brighter and brighter until full day	deep darkness, do not know, stumble
Traveler	son, you	the wicked, they

According to this passage, the path of wisdom occurs within a filial relationship. It is ethically determined and affirms righteousness. It entails a pedagogical process that fosters progressive knowledge and lifelong learning. It promotes flourishing in accord with the order of creation. The way of wickedness, however, thrives within dystopian group identities deriving from self-

exclusion and rebellion. It promotes a lifestyle of chronic wrong-doing, stupor, self-imposed suffering, and ultimately death.

Another motif associated with the two ways is the “straight” and “crooked” path. Michael Carasik described the differences this way: “Biblical texts regularly emphasize following the straight path that is marked out by God's teachings ... When one 'turns', it is only to avoid the path of evil and to return to the straight path of righteousness.” Proverbs 1—9 describes the person who is crooked as “devious in their ways” (2:15), spouting “devious talk” (4:24) and “twisted” speech (8:8). They are “worthless” (6:12). In contrast, those who follow the “straight” path “acknowledge” Yahweh (3:6). They focus on rectitude and fidelity, since their “eyes look directly forward” (4:25). They “understand” and discover “knowledge” (8:8).



For the book of Proverbs, therefore, everyone is walking. Everyone travels a path. Life is a journey in one of two directions and the final destiny of all is either good or evil, light or darkness. “Life is caught between the pull toward God and the good and the pull toward folly and pseudogood.” Everyone is motivated by either the fear of the Lord or by idolatry. Everyone is moving towards blessing or destruction. Each path entails priorities that please or displease God, as well as lifestyles that bless or curse. And every trail springs from and leads to wisdom or folly. Surely, the poet Robert Frost expressed this dilemma well: “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” Those who traverse the paths of righteousness are blessed by God and become a blessing to others.