

# *Light and Dark in the Scriptures*

How Definitions Create  
Spiritual Metaphors

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*Religions often use the terms light and dark to explore abstract concepts. This study uses AntConc, a corpus-creation software, to find each instance of the words light and dark in the standard works of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each occurrence of the terms is analyzed, concluding that light is most often used to represent God and dark is most often used to denote evil. Both light and dark are used more figuratively than literally, confirming the usefulness of metaphors in scriptural contexts. This research can benefit both linguists and gospel scholars seeking to understand scriptural language.*

Scriptures are replete with metaphors revolving around antonyms, which echo Lehi's sentiment in the Book of Mormon that "there is an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). One of the most notable themes of opposition in scriptures across many religions is that of *light* and *dark*. The lemmas *light* and *dark* occur frequently throughout scripture and in a variety of contexts. (As a note, the typical way to refer to these as lemmas would be LIGHT and DARK, but in this article, we will use *light* and *dark* to represent the lemmas in every sense.) With these various contexts come different definitions for both terms. For this research project, we aim to discover how many definitions accompany these terms and how those definitions tie into scriptural metaphors. Additionally, we will find the collocates of these two lemmas, determine how often the two lemmas collocate with each other, and analyze how they are contrasted when they appear together. We hope that this study will give insight into how the scriptural metaphors surrounding *light* and *dark* can increase understanding of target concepts that are sometimes difficult to grasp. These metaphors will also illustrate how people throughout time have perceived God and life through the concepts of light and darkness.

In the King James Version of the Holy Bible, we read that immediately after God formed the heavens and the earth, He created light and then "divided the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:4). This complete separation of darkness from light is repeated throughout the scriptural canon. In the New Testament, John writes, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). In the Book of Mormon, Samuel implores the people to repent, asking, "How long will ye choose darkness rather than light?" (Helaman 13:29). The Doctrine and Covenants clarifies, "That which does not edify is not of God, and is darkness. That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light" (Doctrine and Covenants 50:23–24). Lastly, in the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith records that after "thick darkness gathered around [him] . . . [he] saw a pillar of light . . . above the brightness of the sun" (Joseph Smith—History 1:15–16).

Christianity is not the only religion that uses light and dark as metaphors in scripture; Islam's Qur'an often uses beautiful metaphorical language using the terms *light* and *dark* for much more than mere embellishment (Berrada, 2006, p. 45), and Zoroastrianism also views *light* and *dark* as metaphors for positive and

negative concepts (Fox, 1967). Berrada (2006) lists some definitions often associated with light and dark:

Light in the Qur'an stands for the divine, submission to Allah's guidance, Allah's grace and bounty, spiritual progress, faith, the truth, knowledge, joy and felicity and other positive qualities. However, darkness stands for evil, contumacy and misguidance, spiritual retrogression, atheism, falsehood, ignorance, disquietude, grief and poignant doubt, damnation and other vices and negative qualities. (p. 58)

Others, too, have recognized the influence of these oppositional terms. Prevot (2016) recognizes the potential harm of racism because of this metaphorical opposition, stating that "there is no legitimate theological or spiritual reason to vilify darkly colored embodiment" (p. 166). Although Prevot may be correct in saying that there is no real reason to mark *dark* negatively, it would seem that the common semantic ambiguity that often accompanies *light* and *dark* may be intentional in many cases (Thiselton, 1997, p. 94). This ambiguity therefore creates a dichotomy wherein readers of religious text can recognize a heightened, spiritual meaning based on the physical meanings of *light* and *dark*. As Berrada (2006) says concerning this idea, "The light and darkness duality is a source domain that is frequently used to illuminate less delineated and abstract target domains" (p. 46).

Some scriptural examples demonstrate *light* and *dark* in a literal sense, while others demonstrate the terms in a metaphorical sense. We intend to analyze how the definitions of the terms differ when they are used figuratively versus when they are used literally. Figuratively, *light* and *dark* can have a plethora of metaphors: good versus evil, knowledge versus ignorance, day versus night, clarity versus confusion, God versus Satan, revealed versus hidden, perfection versus imperfection, freedom versus captivity, salvation versus damnation, life versus death, righteousness versus wickedness, and more. Deignan (1999) found that "lexemes seem to develop metaphorical senses that are consistent with relationships between their literal senses" (p. 337). This leads us to hypothesize that there may be more contexts that include the words *light* or *dark* than there are definitions.

Navigating the scriptural metaphors revolving around *light* and *dark* is meaningful for many reasons. Spiritually, grasping target concepts through metaphors in the scriptures can increase gospel understanding, deepen faith, and encourage a closer relationship

with the divine. Academically, this research can add to a body of other research that has been conducted on metaphor usage regarding source and target domains. And linguistically, it is fascinating to delve into how physical circumstances influence language so powerfully that a metaphorical world can be created.

## Methodology

Our study of the meanings of *light*, *dark*, and the various forms of these words comes solely from the volumes of scripture used in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We created our own corpus in AntConc, a downloadable computer program that builds corpora, using the text files (i.e., files saved with the .txt extension) of the LDS canon: the Old and New Testaments (King James Version), the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Through AntConc, we were able to query each form of *light* and *dark* that we are studying and saw detailed concordances and collocates throughout all the scriptural text.

Our searches included all forms of *light* and *dark*—as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. After gathering the results, we saved the two outputs and opened them in Google Sheets. In order to ensure accuracy between both of us, we performed an intercoder reliability test by taking fifty randomized concordance lines each and then reviewing and defining them individually. When our lines matched at least eighty percent of the time, we eliminated any terms that varied between our codes. Eliminating varying terms helped us when we coded the total number of concordance lines (approximately one thousand between *light* and *dark*) so that we had an accurate, organized system whereby we could define and categorize the terms. Based on our results after coding the fifty randomized concordances for *light*, we determined that we would 1) tag each instance for part of speech and 2) categorize each instance in one of two categories—*figurative light* or *literal light*—and then subcategorize. Under *figurative light*, we created the subcategories of *revelation*, *truth*, *goodness*, *representing God*, and *knowledge*. Under *literal light*, we created the subcategories of *celestial bodies* (i.e., sun, moon, stars), *lamp*, *morning*, and *day*. From our preliminary research based on the fifty randomized concordances for *dark*, we determined that we would code the total number of concordances similarly to our categorization of forms of *light*: 1) tag each instance for part of speech and 2) categorize

each instance in one of two categories—*figurative dark* or *literal dark*—and then subcategorize. Under *figurative dark*, we created subcategories of *evil*, *opposite of joy*, *death*, *spiritual anguish*, and *confusion*. Under *literal dark*, we formed subcategories of *night* and *absence of light*.

Each hit from our queries had its own row in the sheet including the concordance line and text file that it came from, with space in a column next to the concordances to fill out our definitions. With each case of *light* and *dark*, we assigned a corresponding part of speech and sense, including whether it was being used figuratively or literally, until we discovered how many various definitions we found. We created the above list of definitions to use based on the definitions we assigned during the intercoder reliability test. As we coded the rest of the concordance lines, if none of the definitions on that list fit, then we would add a new definition to the list and alert the other researcher of the added definition so that it could then be included in their coding too, if needed.

To demonstrate this process of assigning definitions, take this example: in one concordance line from Ether, when the brother of Jared asks for a way to have light while his people are crossing the sea in barges, one line says, “And behold, O Lord, in them there is no light; whither shall we steer?” (Ether 2:19, italics added). For this concordance line, we wrote “literal (n): source of illumination” in the column next to it, recognizing that in this case, *light* is being used literally as a noun to mean “source of illumination.” If we ever needed a fuller concordance line, we found the correct scripture on the website for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

After we completed our respective halves of the data, with both of us coding half of the concordances for *light* and half of the concordances for *dark*, we discussed any concordances that we didn’t feel confident in, then together assigned a definition that fit most closely with the rest of the concordance. After completing this coding process, we then grouped the concordances by their definitions and evaluated how many definitions we found, while also taking into account how many definitions were literal and how many were figurative.

In addition to analyzing the multiple senses of *light* and *dark* based on our queries, we also evaluated the collocates that most often surrounded the two words. We paid close attention to the

collocates within five words of our queried terms and looked for patterns after eliminating basic function words (articles, determiners, conjunctions, and so on). This enabled us to see how often *light* and *dark* appear close together throughout the scriptures, and we were able to see what content terms are most often associated with *light* and *dark* as separate terms.

## Results

Our initial research involved ensuring intercoder reliability. We successfully accomplished our goal of having at least eighty percent accuracy for fifty terms and were able to continue forth with our research. In sum, there were 627 hits from AntConc for our query on *light* and 416 hits from AntConc for our query on *dark*. One researcher took the first 313 hits for *light* and the first 208 hits for *dark*, and the other researcher took the last 312 hits for *light* and the last 208 hits for *dark*.

After working together to review the chapters and nearby verses that these lines came from, we decided to remove some concordances from our analysis because they were not directly related to our research. For example, we removed the concordances that talked about thunder and lightning from the *light* section. Ultimately, we ended with 558 concordances for *light* and 403 concordances for *dark*. We then successfully defined all 961 concordance lines.

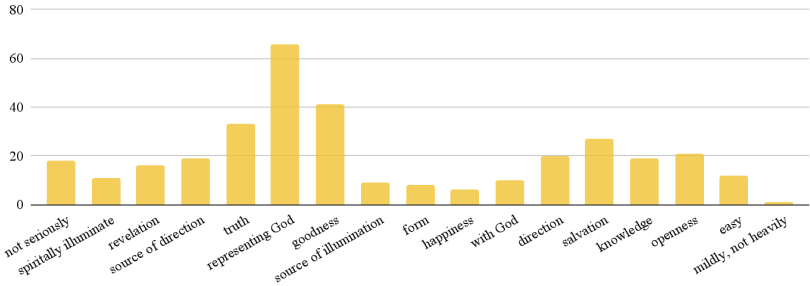
Since it was necessary to add to and alter our original set of definitions, our final set of definitions when we completed coding included seventeen definitions that were used figuratively for *light* and eight definitions that were used literally for *light*. Figures 1 and 2 show the list of definitions that were found throughout all four volumes of scripture, as well as the frequency of each definition.

In each category of figurative and literal, there is a clear leader in terms of frequency: “representing God” was the most commonly assigned definition among the instances of *light* used figuratively:

While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. (John 12:36)

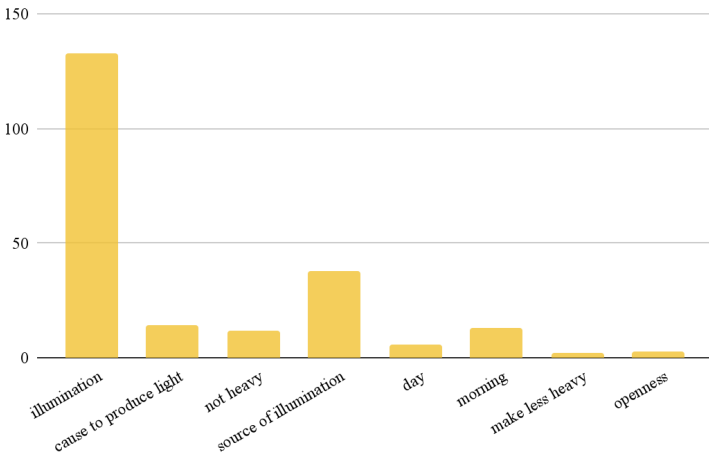
**Figure 1**

*Figurative Senses of Light*



**Figure 2**

*Literal Senses of Light*



The most commonly assigned definition among the instances of *light* used literally was “illumination”:

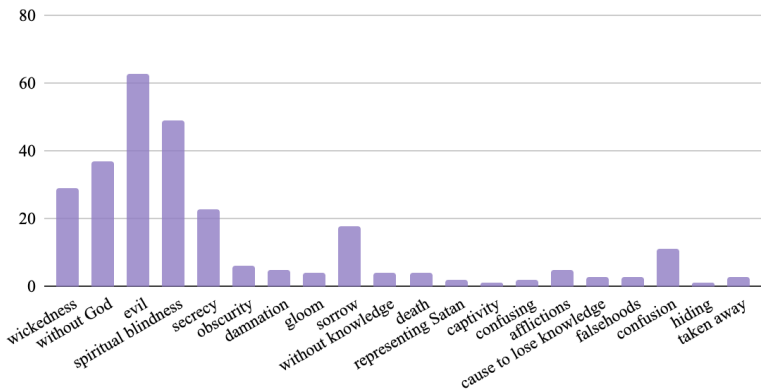
And the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:45)

Collectively, there were 337 total instances of *light* used figuratively and 221 total instances of *light* used literally. Using *light* so often in a figurative sense, then, must confirm what previous scholars have found about scriptural ontological metaphors—people can often understand abstract concepts better when put into concrete terms that they tend to be more familiar with.

According to Berrada’s (2006) findings about how *light* is perceived in the Qur’an, “Al-Ghazali made a distinction between physical light, which is perceived through the eye—the organ of vision—and the inward eye—which is variously labeled Intelligence, Spirit, Human Soul. The latter is superior to the former, which is defective and limited in its perception of reality” (p. 50).

After we completed our coding for the *light* concordances, we coded the *dark* concordances. Because we needed to add more definitions than we originally had from the intercoder reliability test, we ended with twenty senses for *figurative dark* and six senses for *literal dark*. Figures 3 and 4 provide details about these senses and their corresponding frequencies.

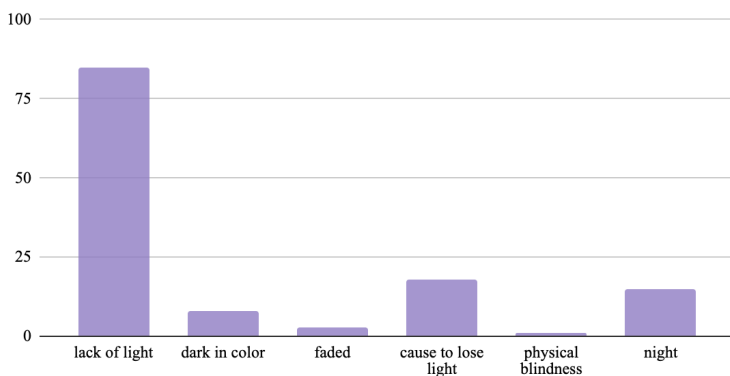
**Figure 3**  
*Figurative Senses of Dark*





**Figure 4**

*Literal Senses of Dark*



As was the case with the senses for *light*, some senses for *dark* are clearly more common than the others. Figuratively, the most frequent sense was “evil”:

And there are also secret combinations, even as in times of old, according to the combinations of the devil, for he is the founder of all these things; yea, the founder of murder, and works of darkness. (2 Nephi 26:22)

The most frequent literal sense for *dark* was “lack of light”:

And it was in the morning, and the darkness dispersed from off the face of the land. (3 Nephi 10:9)

Altogether, there were 273 counts of *dark* being used figuratively and 130 of *dark* being used literally. Just as with *light*, the fact that *dark* is used throughout the scriptures so often in a figurative sense indicates how people throughout time have relied on linguistic metaphors to grasp abstract concepts. Because the literal, physical concepts of *light* and *dark* are so familiar to the human family, these concepts can be used with a vast number of applications to increase understanding of less familiar topics like spiritual blindness, secrecy, and confusion.

After we completed the coding process and the accompanying analysis, we returned to AntConc for a collocation analysis. We collected the thirteen most frequent collocates for *light* and *dark*

separately, after eliminating function words (see figures 5 and 6). We used multiple imputation (MI) for our collocation statistic. Collocates were useful in determining which definition most closely matched the term in question in each concordance line. Additionally, putting together the lists of the most frequently used collocates enabled us to recognize common themes surrounding *light* and *dark*, regardless of whether each instance was used figuratively or literally. The most significant finding from our collocate research is that the two terms are most often associated with each other, reinforcing our hypothesis that the terms being used in juxtaposition clarifies the contrast between the concepts of metaphorical light and darkness.

The most frequent collocate with *light* was *darkness*, and the second most frequent collocate with *light* was *light*.

**Figure 5**

*Collocates for Light*

Rank	Collocate	Raw Frequency	Normalized Frequency	Collocation statistic
1	darkness	73	60.02	15.79
2	light	56	46.04	14.70
3	God	39	32.06	10.40
4	give	35	28.78	12.63
5	Lord	29	23.84	9.39
6	life	24	19.73	12.97
7	world	23	18.91	12.93
8	day	22	18.09	11.12
9	great	19	15.62	11.30
10	shine	18	14.80	16.48
11	saw	18	14.80	12.29
12	out	18	14.80	10.25
13	truth	17	13.98	13.29

**Figure 6**

*Collocates for Dark*

Rank	Collocate	Raw Frequency	Normalized Frequency	Collocation statistic
1	light	82	67.42	9.28
2	darkness	29	23.84	8.48
3	out	28	23.02	9.41
4	day	26	21.38	5.39
5	works	23	18.91	7.66
6	shineth	17	13.98	11.76
7	land	17	13.98	4.35
8	great	16	13.15	5.07
9	earth	16	13.15	5.08
10	thick	15	12.33	10.37
11	sun	15	12.33	8.16
12	secret	15	12.33	8.33
13	night	15	12.33	7.10

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)

That which is of God is light, and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day. (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24)

Adversely, the most frequent collocate with *dark* was *light*, and the second most frequent collocate with *dark* was *darkness*:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. (2 Nephi 9:2)

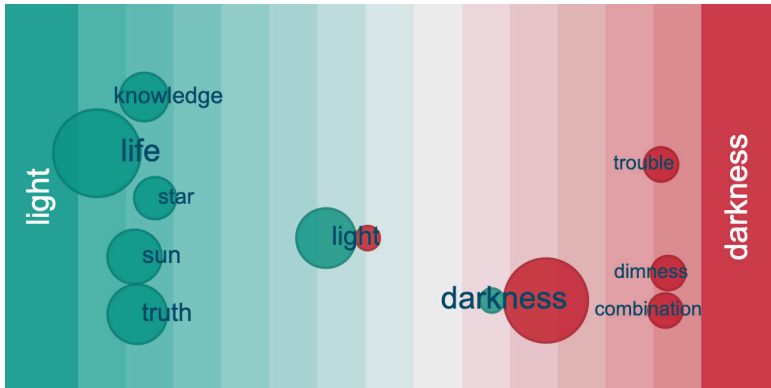
And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not. (John 1:5)

It is also interesting to note that since the two words appear closely together so often, they share many other collocates as well, including *day*, *great*, and variations of *shine*.

In our early research, we also uploaded the text files of all the scriptures to Sketch Engine, a corpus and text analysis software, to do additional collocation research for *light* and *dark*. Unsurprisingly, in this search, we found that the words that collocate with *light* have a more positive connotation than those that collocate with *dark*. Some of the most common nouns that collocate with *light* in a construction such as “NOUN of *light/dark*” are *father*, *angel*, *child*, and *witness*. Some that collocate most frequently with *dark* in the same construction, on the other hand, are *mist*, *vapor*, and *power*. The words *mist*, *vapor*, and *power* are not too negatively connotated, but other less frequent collocates are more negative, such as *horror*. When either *light* or *dark* was paired with another noun separated by a coordinating conjunction, the connotation difference is more noticeable, as shown in the figure 7 below. These results align with the previous research done by Berrada (2006), Prevot (2016), and others who have discovered the ubiquitous metaphors that connect *light* with more positive terms and *dark* with more negative terms.

The findings from our collocation research also illustrate that the concepts of *light* and *dark* were used as a way for the authors of the scriptures to express their perceptions and their understanding of the gospel. This is especially true of the collocates for *light*, which include terms like *God*, *give*, *Lord*, *life*, *world*, *day*, *great*, *shine*, and *truth*. Each of these terms supports the idea that *light* is indeed associated with describing God, life, and the world.

Figure 7



Combining this knowledge with our earlier findings shown in figure 1, we can understand that people in the scriptures used *light* collocated with God, life, and the world in a sense associated with positive definitions, indicating their positive perceptions of the three concepts.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Performing the intercoder reliability test and recognizing our similar results, even with just fifty of the approximately one thousand concordance lines, showed us as researchers that distinctions concerning *light* and *dark* in a scriptural sense must include not only a position in the literal and figurative dichotomy for either term, but a subcategorization that specifies how the term works either literally or figuratively. This supports the research done by Deignan (1999) as referred to in the introduction. Both literal and figurative senses of *light* and *dark* have similar meanings, so they needed to be described further in order to include a more full definition. Because the literal and figurative definitions of the terms *light* and *dark* are so similar in the majority of cases, these terms are appropriate to use in scriptural metaphors. Scriptural metaphors including the terms *light* and *dark* are common, and our results show that the similarities between literal and figurative uses of these terms make metaphors easily understandable.

Categorizing each concordance line of *light* and *dark* is research that can be applied both to the world of linguistics as well as to the world of scripture study. Linguistically, our research thus far shows (and will likely continue to show) the role of semantics in understanding metaphors. Semantically, both *light* and *dark* have several senses, as we laid out in our results. Metaphors often work well because the two concepts being compared (e.g., literal light from the sun and figurative light from spiritual enlightenment) are similar in many ways (e.g., light from the sun and spiritual enlightenment both warm one's soul and increase vision and understanding), and yet differ in a crucial way (e.g., the warmth and ability to see is literal when connected to the sun, and is figurative for the idea of spiritual enlightenment).

Our research is also beneficial for those concerned more with the spiritual takeaway from our research beyond the linguistic evidence. Finding the frequency of which forms of *light* or *dark* are being used in the scriptures can help those interested in

scriptural study develop a sense of how often further clarification may be required when teaching or learning about scriptural doctrine. Understanding when metaphors are and are not being used can also be crucial to understanding what is and is not doctrine in the first place.

We hope that our research benefits both linguists and scriptural scholars alike. As we have furthered our research of *light* and *dark* and the literal and figurative uses of each term, we have been able to further discuss the implications of our findings and how our research builds upon prior research. Additional research in this area could evaluate other oppositional ontological metaphors in the scriptures to see if other concrete concepts such as freedom and captivity or life and death are also used more often figuratively than literally. This study of *light* and *dark* has allowed us to recognize how defining each term as it is given and taking into account the collocates in each individual instance brings enlightened understanding to scriptural metaphors, defining what they mean to both gospel scholars and linguists alike.

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