

# CHIASMUS

## IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

### THE BOOK OF MORMON DOES IT AGAIN

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Instead of burying it deep in the academic journals, let's put it out in the headlines—a new discovery has been made! This particular discovery is not an archeological one nor, strictly speaking, an historical one, but rather a unique type of literary discovery that helps modern minds to understand the literature of the ancient Near East.

There has already been much discussion about this discovery in relation to the Bible, and now it is time that we consider it in relation to the Book of Mormon.

As a point of information, let me bring you up to date on what chiasmus is and when it was discovered in the Bible. It now appears certain that the ancient Israelites not only had a unique message to give to the world, but they also had a unique way in which to write this message down. Chiasmus is one aspect of that way of writing, or, in other words, one of the literary techniques present in the Bible that has recently attracted the attention of erudite scholars.

Chiasmus was first noticed by a few nineteenth century pioneer theologians in Germany and England, but the idea had to wait until the 1930s before it found an ardent exponent, Nils Lund, who was able to lay the principle before the eyes of the world in a convincing way. But even at that, it was not until the decade of the 1960s after much more had been learned about the philology of early Semitic languages, that chiasmus was properly understood and unequivocally acknowledged. Today, articles on the subject are quite common.

What is it that has drawn this attention? To see this for ourselves, we had best begin with an example of chiasmus, and a convenient one is to be found in Psalms 3:7-8, which reads (translating literally from the Hebrew):

7. Save me, O my God; for thou has smitten all my enemies on the cheek-bone;
8. The teeth of the wicked thou hast broken; to Jehovah, the salvation.

What's so odd about that? Well, a careful look at these verses reveals something that at first glance is not altogether obvious: namely, that the words occur in a peculiar sequence.

Everything gets said twice, back to front, or in a reverse order. Consider what happens when we rewrite these verses by arranging them in the following way:

*a Save me  
b O my God,  
c For thou has smitten  
d All my enemies  
e On the cheekbone;  
e The teeth  
d of the wicked  
c thou has broken;  
b to Jehovah,  
a the salvation.*

It now becomes quite clear to us that the repetition in these verses is not just a haphazard redundancy. It is an ordered reversal of the original sequence of the psalmist's thoughts.

Scholars in fact find that many passages follow this same pattern of inverted repetition, and when they do they call them chiasmic. I think it would be fair to say that the discovery of this pattern, the discovery of chiasmus, has added more insights into the nature of biblical literature than has any other single discovery of a comparable kind in modern times.

Some chiasms are relatively straightforward, such as the example in Genesis 7:21-23 (translating literally from the Hebrew):

*a There died on the earth  
b all birds,  
c cattle,  
d beasts and creeping things,  
e man,  
f all life,  
g died,  
g and was destroyed.  
f Every living thing,  
e both man,  
d creeping things,  
c cattle  
b birds,  
a were destroyed from the earth.*

Other chiasms, as we shall see, are much more complex.

It is also important for us to notice that chiasmus is not just a simple repetition; it also involves an intensification or an aspect of completion in the second half. Compare, for example, the more powerful ideas of Psalms 3:8 over 3:7: the strength of the teeth over the passive nature of the cheekbone; or getting broken vis-a-vis getting smitten; being wicked instead

of just being an enemy. Quite consistently, therefore, a shift can be seen to occur at the center of a chiasm so that the bigger, more powerful, or more intense ideas will appear in the second half of chiastic passages.

Chiasmus is not limited to short passages. It may also be used to give order, emphasis, and completeness to longer passages, such as is the case in the 58<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

- a Do ye indeed, O gods speak righteousness?  
Do ye judge uprightly, O ye sons of men?*
- b Nay in the heart ye work wickedness,  
Ye weigh out the violence of your hands in  
the earth.*
- c The wicked are estranged from the womb.*
- d Their poison is like the poison of a serpent.*
- e O god  
break  
their teeth in their mouth,*
- e the great teeth of the young lions  
break out  
O Jehovah.*
- d They shall melt away like waters, like a  
snail will melt as it goes along . . .*
- c Abortions of a woman that have not beheld  
the sun . . .*
- b The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the  
vengeance; he shall wash his feet in the blood  
of the wicked.*
- a And men shall say, there is a reward for righteousness.  
Surely there is a God that judgeth the earth.*

By comparing each emphasized word in the first half of this psalm with the corresponding emphasized word in the second half, you can see the interesting chiastic order and the contrasting intensifications that have been written into this psalm. Chiasmus makes this poem harmonic, complete, and brilliant. No end is left untied. No thought is left unbalanced. And yet it flows freely and naturally from one point to the next and back again. To an ancient Israelite this was beautiful, this was metrical, this was inspirational.

A further phenomenon that we can see in the structure of the 58th Psalm is the importance of the chiastic turning point. Notice how the short prayer at the center of this psalm is marked and spotlighted. The prayer is set in the center for the very purpose of showing how prayer to the Lord God can turn everything completely around. After the prayer the strength of the wicked melts away like the slime of a snail, while the requests of the righteous are granted.

Needless to say, the discovery of chiasmus has given us plenty to think about. It has led us to think about the nature of our sacred literature and to reevaluate the skill and deliberation with which it was written. By it many passages that were previously obscure have now become

clear. Other places that once seemed disorganized have now regained their original orderliness. Above all, we have learned once again that, if we are to judge the literature of another culture, we must not judge it according to our likes and dislikes. The fact that chiasmus was a unique and prevalent form of Hebrew writing required us to take it into account when we consider the literary accomplishments of ancient Israel.

Let us turn now to the Book of Mormon. What we would like to know is what the discovery of chiasmus should mean for us and our understanding of the Book of Mormon. Surely it would be spectacular if this long-forgotten aspect of Hebrew literature were also to appear in the Book of Mormon. In a sense, we might even say that it ought to appear in the Book of Mormon, it being of Hebraic origins. Moreover, we have several specific reasons for expecting chiasmus there: for one thing, Nephi tells us that he is writing in the language of the Egyptians but "according to the learning of the Jews." (1 Ne. 1:2) What could the phrase, "learning of the Jews" better refer to in this context, than to some particular Hebraic style of writing? And furthermore, with a little luck, the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon just might help to explain its repetitious, roundabout way of saying things, which has made it hard for many people from Mark Twain on down to read and enjoy the Book of Mormon.

Thus, the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is true to itself, true to its general cultural origins, and truly a remarkable piece of religious literature in its own right.

Opening the Book of Mormon itself, we find that it more than fulfills our expectations. It contains chiasms of all sorts and sizes. Some are long, some are short; some are poetical, some are practical; some are simple, some are elaborate. They all are artistic and meaningful. More often than not, the prophets of the Book of Mormon use chiasmus as a device through which they can focus our attention upon the central idea of their message. . . This is done by placing the central idea at the turning point of the chiasm. Significantly enough, the central idea of the majority of chiasmic passages in the Book of Mormon deals with the divinity of Jesus Christ and man's direct relationship to him.

Consider first Mosiah 3:18-19:

. . . but men drink damnation to their own souls except

*a they humble themselves*

*b and become as little children*

*c and believe that salvation . . . is . . . in and*

*through the atoning blood of Christ, the  
Lord Omnipotent.*

*d For the natural man*

*e is an enemy to God,*

*f and has been from the fall of Adam,*

*f and will be, forever and ever,*

*e unless he yields to the enticings of the*

*Holy Spirit,*

*d And putteth of the natural man*

*c and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord,*

*b and becometh as a child,*

*a submissive, meek, humble . . . full of love . . .*

The word order of this passage is undeniably chiasmatic. It is used here by King Benjamin to describe the turning around that occurs when one's life is converted to God, when one puts off the natural man and grows from belief in Christ to sanctification through Christ.

Indeed we find that much of King Benjamin's speech is built upon chiasmatic elements. Another easy-to-find chiasm is at Mosiah 4:10-12. See if you can identify its six repeating elements! Clearly, the precise and intricate structure of this great speech adds to it to make it a masterpiece of religious literature.

Another famous author of the Book of Mormon who creatively employed the principles of chiasmus to great advantage was Alma the Younger. It was Alma the Younger whose conversion to the Lord was so powerful and rich that it affected an entire generation at the time it happened and has since become one of the most inspirational stories recorded in the Book of Mormon.

Alma himself gives us two accounts of that miraculous conversion; the first is found in Mosiah 27:24-31. There we read the words that he spoke extemporaneously immediately after he regained consciousness: they are not chiasmatic. The second account that Alma gives appears in Alma 36:1-30, at a time when Alma was an old man giving a blessing to his son Helaman. Alma had had a whole lifetime to reflect and collect his thoughts about that great turning point in his life. In harmony with the nature of that event he chose to express his story in chiasmatic form. Just look at how it turned out!

*a My son, give ear to my words (verse 1)*

*b Keep the commandments [and] ye shall prosper in the land (1)*

*c Captivity of our fathers -- bondage (2)*

*d Surely God did deliver them (2)*

*e Trust in God (3)*

*f Support in trials, trouble, and afflictions (3)*

*g I know this not of myself but of God (4)*

- h Born of God (5)*
- i Seek no more to destroy the church of God (9)*
- j Gell to the earth (10)*
- k Limbs paralyzed (10)*
- l The agony of conversion . . .destroyed, torment, (11 - 16)  
harrowed up, racked, the pains of hell, inexpressible horror,  
banished and extinct, the pains of a damned soul*
- m I remember . . . the coming of one Jesus Christ,  
a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world*
- m I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God,  
have mercy on me (17-18)*
- l The joy of conversion no more pain, what joy,  
marvelous light, exquisite, nothing as sweet, singing  
and praising God, longing to be with God (19-22)*
- k Limbs received their strength again (23)*
- j Stood upon my feet (23)*
- i Labored without ceasing to bring souls unto repentance (24)*
- h Many have been born of God (26)*
- g Knowledge is of God (26)*
- f Supported under trials and troubles, yea afflictions (27)*
- e Trust in him (27)*
- d He will still deliver me (27)*
- c Egypt -- captivity (28-29)*
- b Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (30)*
- a This according to his word (30)*

This is truly an amazing passage of scripture, both in its rich content and in its complex structure. Alma has skillfully framed the story of his conversion with chiastic panels for the sole purpose of drawing our attention to the centrality of Jesus Christ in that conversion. Compared with any chiastic passage in Hebrew literature, Alma chapter 36 equals or betters them all in terms of balance, rhythm, impact, and fluency in this artistic form.

Another passage in which Alma uses the chiastic form with unusual novelty and creativity is Alma 41:13-15. His twist here is extremely clever and unequalled in Hebraic literature. See if you can follow him as he lists four pairs of terms and then pairs two lists of four terms and reverses their order at the same time! In all seriousness and in all respects, this is a great play on words.

By far the most subtle use of chiasmus in any work is its role in creating the structural design behind longer passages and entire books. Consider briefly the outline of the First Book of Nephi and how the order of Nephi's narration revolves around his vision of the Spirit of the Lord:

- a Lehi's dream leads him to prophesy warnings to the Jews (chapter 1)*
- b The departure from Jerusalem (2)*
- c Nephi accomplishes a great feat in obtaining  
the brass plates of 1 Nephi 3:7; the brothers are*

- confounded (3-5)*
- d Ishmael joins the group with his daughters (7)*
- e The tree of life (8)*
- f Lehi prophesies about the Old World and the coming of the Lamb (10)*
- g Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord (11)*
- f Nephi prophesies about the New World and the coming of the Lamb (12-14)*
- e The tree of life interpreted (15)*
- d The sons of Lehi marry the daughters of Ishmael and Ishmael dies (16)*
- c Nephi accomplishes a great feat by building a ship of 1 Nephi 17:3; the brothers are confounded (17)*
- b The departure from the Old World (18)*
- a Nephi warns the Jews and quotes the prophecies of Isaiah (19-22)*

More than ever before, we are now in a position to admire the purposeful and stunning unity of Nephi's message. The long-neglected principle of chiasmus unfolds the fact that when Nephi revised the record of Lehi, Nephi's mind was clearly organized and his heart was intent upon expressing the central importance of his great vision with the Spirit of the Lord. He achieves this expression via chiasmus. By understanding this, we can point to the concerted power of Nephi's style, and we can get explicitly to the point of Nephi's inspiration.

I suppose that the skeptics are going to argue against this analysis of First Nephi and claim that it is totally a contrived and unnecessary way of explaining the text of First Nephi, for such is the standard argument against chiasmic analyses of biblical passages. But in the case of the chiasms from the Book of Mormon, these objections can be tossed aside as unconvincing, unsatisfactory, unimaginative, and unintelligent. Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is both a necessary and a natural way of explaining some things in the Book of Mormon that go unaccounted for otherwise.

Should we consider it contrived that Ishmael is mentioned only twice in the entire Book of Mormon and that these two occurrences just happen to fall symmetrically around 1 Nephi 11? How else, except by chiasmus, can we explain the postponed interpretation of the vision of the tree of life? One would expect the interpretation to follow immediately after the dream, as most interpretative passages in the Book of Mormon do, and not several chapters later.

Are we to believe that the unruly brothers of Nephi really waited nine chapters to marry the daughters of Ishmael? Are we to neglect such specific parallels between the first half of 1 Nephi and its second half--e.g. 3:7 and 17:3--or again the fact that Nephi is bound by cords once in chapter 5 and again in chapter 18? Or how are we to explain the fact that Nephi wrote two books (1 Nephi and 2 Nephi) instead of just running it all together into one, except by reference to the individual structure of each book?

To answer any of these questions, chiasmus must be called into the discussion to explain the underlying structural organization behind Nephi's written record.

Fortunately, it is a perfectly natural thing to appeal to chiasmus in cases such as these. After all, if Lehi were the one who was telling the story, he would have told it much differently. Would Lehi have spent so much time on the story of Laban and so little time on the vision that prompted him to get out of Jerusalem? Surely not. What we have in 1 Nephi is Nephi telling the story, and he does so in Nephi's way of seeing things. Thus it is perfectly natural to find that Nephi gives his autobiography a structure all its own, a structure that conveys by its very form a message of emphatic centrality and symmetrical contrasts about important events in Nephi's life.

We could make similar comments about every chiastic passage in the Book of Mormon. Chiasmus is both a necessary and natural way of understanding Book of Mormon literature.

Time now for a few final evaluations of what we have learned about chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. In the first place, we have demonstrated the extensive existence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon beyond any possible doubt. We have no choice but to treat the Book of Mormon, especially its earliest sections, as chiastic literature that is cognate and congruent in its form with early Hebraic poesy.

Secondly, we may find that we want to put this knowledge to work in two ways: either as evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon or as a key to unlocking its deeper beauties and more profound meanings.

Taken as evidence of the Book of Mormon, chiasmus offers us a touchstone like we have rarely ever had before. Scholars are saying things today like "Where there is chiasmus, there is the influence of a Hebraic hand." And yet such a thing was totally unknown to Joseph Smith and universally unrecognized by the world until the present decade. While the Book of Mormon is richly chiastic, extensive structural chiasmus has yet to be found in any other literature in the world other than the Hebrew. Thus it seems that we are able to meet the demands of an exceptionally strong conditional here: Chiasmus is in a literature *if* and only *if* its roots are Hebraic.

To cap it all, we can rule out the odd chance that Joseph Smith learned about chiasmus through scrutinously reading the Bible on the simple grounds that the King James translation, which he used, obscures almost every chiastic formation possible. Either in an attempt to avoid redundant repetitions or to prevent awkward word orders, the King James translators did a good job of leveling almost every chiasm in the Bible. Their "good style" was anathema to "good Hebrew."

But for spiritual enrichment, the greater use of chiasmus is to be found in the light that it sheds upon the Book of Mormon itself. The religious wars of the 1970s will be fought against the specter of meaninglessness, and in this battle chiasmus helps us to understand the rich meanings behind the messages of the prophets in the Book of Mormon. Chiasmus helps us to appreciate the depths that are plumbed and the intricacies that are penetrated by the thoughts of men like Nephi, King Benjamin, and Alma the Younger. It allows us to snatch up in a breath the subtle beauties of their scintillating and inspired verses. Through chiasmus we come a giant step closer to the Spirit of and in the Book of Mormon.

But still, in this endeavor we only stand in front of an open door with plenty of room left ahead of us for learning and feeling about the Book of Mormon. But from our present vantage point we can certainly feel justified, by many mutually self-reinforcing indications, in believing that we have here a viable door to enter, a profitable way to go, and a rich meaning to pursue.

*Side Note:*

*Some months ago, John announced in an academic journal the remarkable discovery that an ancient and dhighly specialized Hebrew literary style could be found throughout the Book of Mormon. A world famous, non-Mormon scholar called it the "most stunning information I've learned concerning the Book of Mormon." John, presently a doctoral student at England's Oxford University, is a transplanted Californian via BYU.*

#### Key to Mosiah 5:10-12

- a And now . . . whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ*
- b must be called by some other name;*
- c therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God*
- d I would that ye should remember also, that this is the name . . . .*
- e that never should be blotted out,*
- f except if be through transgression.*
- f therefore, take heed that ye do not transgress,*
- e that the name be not blotted out of your hearts . . . .*
- d I would that ye should remember to retain this name . . . . .*
- c that ye are not found on the left hand of God,*
- b but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called,*
- a and also, the name by which he shall call you.*

#### Key to Alma 41:13-15

- a My son . . . the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again*
- b evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish--*
- c<sub>1</sub> c<sub>2</sub> w<sub>1</sub> w<sub>2</sub> good for that which is good;*
- x<sub>1</sub> x<sub>2</sub> righteous for that which is righteous;*
- y<sub>1</sub> y<sub>2</sub> just for that which is just;*
- z<sub>1</sub> z<sub>2</sub> merciful for that which is merciful.*
- Therefore, my son, see that you are*
- c<sub>2</sub> z<sub>2</sub> merciful unto your brethren;*
- y<sub>2</sub> deal justly,*
- x<sub>2</sub> judge righteously,*
- &*
- w<sub>2</sub> and do good continually;*
- And if ye do all these things then*
- Shall ye receive your reward; yea,*
- c<sub>1</sub> z<sub>1</sub> ye shall have mercy restored unto you again;*

*y<sub>1</sub> ye shall have justice restored unto you again;*  
*x<sub>1</sub> ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again;*  
*w<sub>1</sub> and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again*  
*b For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again,*  
*and be restored;*  
*a therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth*  
*the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.*