

Chiasms in Scripture

What is a chiasm?

Chiasm is pronounced ky'-az-um. A chiasm is a writing style that uses a unique text repetition pattern for clarification and emphasis. This repetition form appears throughout the Bible and the Book of Mormon yet it is not well known.

Chiasms are structured in a repeating A-B-C ... C'-B'-A' pattern. An example of a simple chiasm from the Bible (Matthew 6:24):

A "No man can serve two masters:
B for either he will hate the one,
C and love the other;
C' or else he will hold to the one
B' and despise the other.
A' Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

Simply put, a chiasm is a repetition of similar ideas in the reverse sequence.

A chiasm organizes themes much like a sandwich:

A) A piece of bread on top
B) Mustard
C) A piece of meat
C') Another piece of meat
B') More mustard
A') Another piece of bread on the bottom

Chiasms generally focus on the flavorful meat, but the bread and mustard are necessary for a complete sandwich. Some chiasms do not have a mustard layer, other chiasms have lettuce on both sides of the meat, and some have just one piece of delicious meat.

Per Raymond C. Treat in "Chiasms in the Book of Mormon":

A Handbook of Literary Terms (Yelland et al 1950:32) defines chiasm as, "A passage in which the second part is inverted and balanced against the first."

More regarding chiasm from Raymond C. Treat:

"Most of the essential features of chiastic form and function" have been detected as early as late third millennium B.C. (2500-2000 B.C.) (Smith 1981). However, it appears that the usage of chiasm reached its peak in Hebrew writing-the Bible, especially the Old Testament, being the outstanding example. Welch comments that "Chiasmus remained a common literary form in the Hebrew world until the first century after Christ, when it and most Jewish Institutions were destroyed (1969:72)."

Chiasms in the Bible

Matthew 11:28-30

A "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
B and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,
C and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart:
B' and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy,
A' and my burden is light."

Mark 2:27

A "The sabbath was made
B for man,
B' and not man
A' for the sabbath:"

Amos 5:4-6

For thus saith the LORD unto the house of Israel,

A "Seek ye me, and ye shall live:
B But seek not Bethel,
C nor enter into Gilgal,
D and pass not to Beersheba:
C' for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity,
B' and Bethel shall come to nought.
A' Seek the LORD, and ye shall live;

lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel."

Genesis 3:6 – 3:22

A (6) She ate the fruit from the tree and then gave it to her husband.
B (7) They realized they were naked.
C (8) Adam and Eve hid themselves.
D (9) Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where art thou?"
C' (10) "I hid myself."
B' (11a) "Who told thee that thou wast naked?"
A' (11b) "Hast thou eaten of the tree?"

1 Corinthians 11:27-29

A (27) "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."

B (28) "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup."

A' (29) "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."

The Structure of the Flood Story (Noah)

Genesis 6:10 – 9:19

- A Noah (6:10a)
- B Shem, Ham, and Japheth (10b)
- C Ark to be built (14-16)
- D Flood announced (17)
- E Covenant with Noah (18-20)
- F Food in the ark (21)
- G Command to enter the ark (7:1-3)
- H 7 days waiting for flood (4-5)
- I 7 days waiting for flood (7-10)
- J Entry to ark (11-15)
- K God shuts Noah in (16)
- L 40 days flood (17a)
- M Waters increase (17b-18)
- N Mountains covered (19-20)
- O 150 days water prevail (21-24)

- P GOD REMEMBERS NOAH (8:1)

- O' 150 days waters abate (3)
- N' Mountain tops visible (4-5)
- M' Waters abate (5)
- L' 40 days (end of) (6a)
- K' Noah opens window of ark (6b)
- J' Raven and dove leave ark (7-9)
- I' 7 days waiting for waters to subside (10-11)
- H' 7 days waiting for waters to subside (12-13)
- G' Command to leave ark (15-17 [22])
- F' Food outside ark (9:1-4)
- E' Covenant with all flesh (8-10)
- D' No flood in the future (11-17)
- C' Ark (18a)
- B' Shem, Ham and Japheth (18b)
- A' Noah (19)

Note that various verses are skipped in the compilation above, but the story of the flood does seem to in general provide a symmetric chiasm structure. This implies that God maintains order and symmetry and times in his dealings with men.

Exodus 3:8-17

Reference: http://www.wonderful1.com/Chiasms_in_the_Bible.html

Can you determine the chiasm structure for these verses?

8 And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

9 Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.

10 Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

11 And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?

12 And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.

13 And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?

14 And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

15 And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, the LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.

16 Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt:

17 And I have said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt unto the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.

Chiasm Letter	Verse #	Text
A		
B		
C		
D		
E		
F		
G		
H		
I		
J		
I'		
H'		
G'		
F'		
E'		
D'		
C'		
B'		
A'		

Psalm 3:7-8

Reference: <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1972/02/chiasmus-in-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

If translated literally from the Hebrew it reads:

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

The chiasm:

A Save me,
 B O my God,
 C for thou has smitten
 D all my enemies
 E on the cheek-bone;
 E' The teeth
 D' of the wicked
 C' thou has broken;
 B' to Jehovah,
 A' the salvation.

Genesis 7:21-23

Reference: <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1972/02/chiasmus-in-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

If translated literally from the Hebrew the chiasm is as follows:

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 Possible Bible Examples

There are hundreds of possible chiasms in the Bible. Different sources online present Bible text that they believe to be in a chiasm structure.

Reference: http://www.wonderful1.com/Chiasms_in_the_Bible.html

Genesis 3:5 – 3:22

Genesis 23:7-20

Genesis 23:17-20

Exodus 13:21-14:20

Exodus 14:21-31

Exodus 22:28-23:13

Exodus 32:1-34:170

Leviticus 6:9-13

Numbers 9:18-23

Deuteronomy 3:25-4:22

Deuteronomy 9:6-13

Joshua 22:10-34

Judges 1

1 Samuel 18:11–19:1

2 Samuel 7:19-29

1 Kings 1:10-19

2 Kings 2:2-25

2 Chronicles 5:12-7:6

2 Chronicles 1:1 – 9:31
Hosea 1:9-2:23
Etc.

Chiasms in the Book of Mormon

Per Raymond C. Treat in “Chiasms in the Book of Mormon”:

Much linguistic evidence has come to light since 1830 supporting the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient document. One of the more recent discoveries (Welch 1969) is the recognition that some writers in the Book of Mormon used an ancient literary form as chiasmus or chiasm.

Was Joseph Smith smart enough and literate enough to create these on his own? Did Joseph Smith know about chiasm structure?

Per Raymond C. Treat in “Chiasms in the Book of Mormon”:

When Nils Lund was first introduced to chiastic structure in 1908, known then as “the Inverted order,” he was skeptical about the validity of the form since the work to that point was not sufficiently advanced. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Joseph Smith Jr. knew anything about chiastic structure. Welch (1981:208) comments: “No one seriously contends that Joseph Smith or anyone associated with him knew or could have known of chiasmus or had the training to discover this principle for himself. The evidence is overwhelming against such a claim. And even if he had known in theory of chiasmus, there would still have remained the formidable task of composing the well-balanced, meaningful chiastic structures (combined with other structures unknown or unanalyzed in his time) which are found in precisely those portions of the Book of Mormon in which one would logically and historically expect to find them. Accomplishing all of this would have been an especially imposing task, since the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith's first work, which, at age 24, he dictated without notes mostly inside of six months and rarely revised the only draft which the manuscript ever saw.”

Raymond C. Treat also states regarding the quantity of chiasms in the Book of Mormon:

Robert F. Smith has prepared an index of all the known chiasms in the Book of Mormon discovered to date by various authors. This index shows that in addition to the entire book of First Nephi being a chiasm, there are 61 smaller chiasms within the book.

Mosiah 1:118-120

“But men drink damnation to their own souls, except

A they humble themselves,

B and become as little children,

C and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, 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, for ever and ever;

E' But if he yieldeth to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,

D' and putteth off 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, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.”

Mosiah 3:13-16

Reference: <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1972/02/chiasmus-in-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

Can you determine the chiasm structure for these verses?

13 And now, it shall come to pass that whosoever shall not take upon them the name of Christ, must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God.

14 And I would that ye should remember also, that this is the name that I said I should give unto you, that never should be blotted out, except it be through transgression;

15 Therefore, take heed that ye do not transgress, that the name be not blotted out of your hearts.

16 I say unto you, I would that ye should remember to retain the name written always in your hearts, that ye are not found on the left hand of God, but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called, and also, the name by which he shall call you:

Chiasm Letter	Verse #	Text
A		
B		
C		
D		
E		
F		
F'		
E'		
D'		
C'		
B'		
A'		

1 Nephi 7:3-4

“And I, Nephi, saith unto them, Behold,

A they were made manifest unto the prophet,

B by the voice of the Spirit:

B' For by the Spirit

A' are all things made known unto the prophet,

which shall come upon the children of men according to the flesh.”

2 Nephi 12:25-26

Source: Raymond C. Treat

Can you determine the chiasm structure for these verses?

25 And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say, All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well;

26 And thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.

Chiasm Letter	Verse #	Text
A		
B		
B'		
A'		

First Book of Nephi

Robert F. Smith believes that the entire First Book of Nephi is a chiasm.

- A Introduction (1:1-2)
- B Repentance (1:3)
- C God reigns (1:5-7)
- D Lehi comes to know Christ (1:8-10)
- E Testimony of Christ (1:11-20)
- F God protects the chosen (1:21-23)
- G A part of the House of Israel is being scattered (1:24-25)
- H Obtaining the Plates of Brass (1:59-174)
- I Keeping records (2:1-6)
- J A narrative about: the family of Ishmael, a journey, and rebellion against Nephi (2:8-33)
- K Nephi exhorts his brothers and they turn to the Lord (2:34-36)
- L The Tree of Life (2:41-92)
- M Two sets of records (2:93-102)
- N Prophecy of coming of Christ and other events (3:1-21)
- O "... (Lehi) spake by the power of the Holy Ghost ..." (3:24)
- P Nephi desires righteousness "I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear and know of these things ..." (3:26)
- Q (a) "... the power of the Holy Ghost ... is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him ..." (3:26)
- (b) "... in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself ..." (3:26)
- (c) "For he is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." (3:27)
- R "And the way is prepared from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him;" (3:28)
- Q' (a) "For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them by the power of the Holy Ghost," (3:29-30)
- (b) "as well in this time as in times of old; and as well in times of old as in times to come;" (3:30-31)
- (c) "Wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round." (3:32)
- P' Those who desire wickedness "... if ye have sought to do wickedly in the days of your probation," (3:34)
- O' "And the Holy Ghost giveth authority that I (Nephi) should speak these things and deny them not." (3:36)
- N' Prophecy of coming of Christ and other events (3:37-237)
- M' Two sets of records (3:246-256)
- L' The Tree of Life (4:1-64)
- K' Nephi exhorts his brothers, they humble themselves before the Lord (5:1-5)
- J' A narrative about: the family of Ishmael, a journey, and rebellion against Nephi (5:7-54)
- I' Keeping records (5:218-231)
- H' Information from the Plates of Brass (5:239-7:4)
- G' The House of Israel is to be scattered (7:6-12)
- F' God protects the righteous (7:35-37)
- E' Testimony of Christ (7:43-46)
- D' All the righteous will know Christ (7:55-57)
- C' The Holy One of Israel reigneth (7:62)
- B' Repentance (7:64)
- A' Conclusion (7:65-69)

Fig. 1—A chiasmic outline of the First Book of Nephi.

In addition, Raymond C. Treat believes that various other sections in the Book of Mormon are chiasmatically arranged.

Others

Reference: <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1972/02/chiasmus-in-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

Alma 17:1-30

Etc.