

**CHIASMS
IN THE
BOOK OF MORMON**

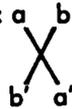
Chiasms in the Book of Mormon

By Raymond C. Treat

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

CHIASM DEFINED

A chiasm is a statement containing two or more parts followed by a restatement in reverse order (ABC C'B'A'). The word chiasm is derived from the Greek letter chi (X) and the Greek word *chiazelm* (to mark with an x) because a two part chiasmic statement may be diagrammed in the form of an X: a b



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."

TYPES OF CHIASMS

David Noel Freedman, Ph. D., Director of Program on Studies in Religion, University of Michigan and General Editor of the *Anchor Bible and Biblical Archaeologist* discusses two kinds of chiasms in his preface to *Chiasmus in Antiquity*. One kind deals with words and the other with ideas. The type dealing with words is easily identified. There is generally no argument as to the existence of this type of chiasm. The words which are inverted or balanced can either be the same, synonyms or antonyms. An example from the Book of Mormon is found in 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 yields 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 and humble . . ."

The last six points parallel or repeat the first six points in reverse order, therefore, chiasm is also defined as an inverted parallelism.

The type of chiasm dealing with ideas is more difficult to identify because there may be disagreement over which ideas form the foundation of the chiasmic structure. The author of this type of chiasm may use it to focus the attention of the reader (or hearer) on the central idea or turning point. A good example of this from the Book of Mormon is found in the First Book of Nephi (fig. 1).

LEADING BOOK ON CHIASM

John Welch, the leading authority on the chiasmic structure of the Book of Mormon has edited a book titled *Chiasmus in Antiquity* which is providing a unique witness of the Book of Mormon. Book of Mormon scholarship is usually prepared by and for Book of Mormon believers and is rarely, if ever, seen by others. This book, however, represents a major exception to this trend. *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, containing a chapter on Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon by Welch, was written by and for the international community of scholars specializing in ancient languages and literature and as such will have wide exposure to a non-Book of Mormon believing audience. For example, three of the articles are written by Israeli scholars:

"Chiasmus in Talmudic-Aggadic Narrative" by Jonah Fraenkel, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer for Halakhic and Aggadic Literature, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

"Structure and Chiasm in Aramaic Contracts and Letters" by Bezalel Porten, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer of Hebrew and Aramaic Ancient Literature, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

"Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative" by Yehuda T. Radday, Ph.D., Associate Professor Bible and Hebrew, Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa.

No doubt the publication of this book represents a major step toward the day when the Book of Mormon will be taken seriously by the world. Freedman states in the preface, "The editor is to be commended for his catholicity and courage, and for his own original contributions in several domains including a unique treatment of the Book of Mormon." Welch, now an Associate Professor of Law at Brigham Young University, obtained his training in ancient literature at BYU through an MA in Latin and Philosophy. His master's thesis was on chiasmus.

HISTORY OF CHIASM

"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)."

It has only been in the last fifty years that there has been a growing awareness of the existence of this form. According to Welch (1981:9):

The early trickle of chiastic commentary, beginning with some initial observations by Johannes Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Tubingen, 1742, John Jebb, *Sacred Literature* (London, 1820), Thomas Boys, *Tactica Sacra* (London, 1824), and then by John Forbes, *Symmetrical Structure of Scripture* (Edinburgh 1854), first grew to a steady flow of productive commentary through the efforts of Nils Lund from 1930 to 1955, and recently has increased dramatically, in both quantity and diversity.

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.

PURPOSE AND EXAMPLES OF CHIASMS

In addition to being evidence for the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the presence of chiastic structure is also helpful in gaining a better understanding of the spiritual message of the book. Chiastic writing will characteristically have the most important point at the center or cross over point. Once a chiastic pattern has been discovered in the Book of Mormon we have a clue to what the writer was trying to emphasize. An excellent example of this is the First Book of Nephi (fig. 1). This outline is based on an unpublished manuscript by Wallace King (n.d.). The central point of the First Book of Nephi according to King's analysis is found in verse 28 of Chapter 3: "And the way is prepared from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him;". Another chiastic analysis of the First Book of Nephi by Robert F. Smith (1977 manuscript) places 1 Nephi 3:38 as the center: ". . . I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceeding high mountain . . ." There is always some minor difference of interpretation when working with chiastic structure based on ideas rather than words as mentioned earlier. However, there does not seem to be any disagreement that the First Book of Nephi is chiastically arranged. Both verse 28 and verse 38 make good central points since both lead to the celestial level life style. King (n.d.:5) points out that the theme of repentance, the message of every prophet, is emphasized by being placed at the opening (B), at the closing (B') and at the center.

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. Smith discovered this short one for example:

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 prophets . . . (1 Nephi 7:3-4)

In addition to his other achievements we must add that Nephi was an accomplished writer. "His use of parallelism, balance, and particularly chiasmus is that of a sophisticated literary technician (Welch 1981:199)." Welch also points out that Nephi divided his writings into two books because "Both books are independent chiastic units, centrally focused and symmetrically organized (1981:100)." Welch's brief outline of the chiastic arrangement of the Second Book of Nephi is as

follows:

- A The Testaments of Lehi, his death (Chs. 1-3:23)
- B Jacob's Commentary on Isaiah 50-51 (Chs. 5-7)
- C Isaiah 2-14 as "third witness" (Chs. 8-10)
- B' Nephi's Commentary on Isaiah (Chs. 11-12)
- A' The Testament of Nephi (Chs. 13-15)

Smith's index indicates that there are 66 other chiasms in the Second Book of Nephi. Welch has identified this short one:

- a And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security
- b that they will say, All is well in Zion
- b' yea, Zion prospereth, all is well
- a' And thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. (II Nephi 12:25-26)

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- 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.

The entire Book of Mosiah is also chiastically arranged. The following outline is based on Welch (1969):

- A King Benjamin exhorts his sons (1:1-13)
- B Mosiah chosen to succeed his father (1:15,16)
- C Mosiah receives the records (1:23)
- D Benjamin's speech and the words of the angel (1:36-2:50)
- E People enter into a covenant (3:6)
- F Priests consecrated (4:4)
- G Ammon leaves Zarahemla for the land of Lehi-Nephi (5:4-8)
- H People in bondage. Ammon put in prison (5:9)
- I The 24 gold plates (5:64)
- J The record of Zeniff begins as he leaves Zarahemla (6:1)
- K Defense against the Lamanites (6:14-57)
- L Noah and his priests (7:1-15)
- M Abinadi persecuted and thrown into prison (7:69)
- N Abinadi reads old law to priests (7:70-99)
- N' Abinadi makes his own prophecies (7:106-8:91)
- M' Abinadi persecuted and killed (9:1-27)
- L' Noah and his priests (9:100-112)
- K' Lamanites threaten the people of Limhi (9:113-139)
- J' Record of Zeniff ends as he leaves the land of Lehi-Nephi (10:19)
- I' The 24 gold plates (9:169)
- H' People of Alma in bondage (11:54-64)
- G' Alma leaves the land of Lehi-Nephi for Zarahemla (11:65)
- F' The church organized by Alma (11:97-104)
- E' Unbelievers refuse to enter covenant (11:105-120)
- D' The words of Alma and the words of the angel of the Lord (11:116-176)
- C' Alma the Younger receives the records (13:1-2)
- B' Judges chosen instead of a king (13:7-62)
- A' Mosiah exhorts his people (13:7-62)

According to Welch's analysis, the theme of repentance, as delivered by the prophet Abinadi, is the chiastic center of the Book of Mosiah. Welch has also analyzed the chiastic structure of Benjamin's proclamation. His 1973 version (manuscript) divided the speech into six parts, each part being a chiasm in itself. If the main theme of each part was further arranged, the pattern would turn out something like this (Welch's parts III and IV have been combined into a single part—"C"):

- A Humble yourselves (serve) (Mosiah 1:38-66)
- B Be obedient (accountable) (1:70-91)
- C Christ is your example (1:95-130)
- B' Believe in Christ (2:8-23)
- A' Repent (2:24-50)

The following chiasm from the Third Book of Nephi is a modification of a pattern discovered by Robert F. Smith (manuscript):

- A Gentiles trodden down (7:40)
- Land of inheritance (7:42)
- B Isaiah 52:8-10 (Zion) (7:43-45)
- C Sick restored-circle of fire (Zion) (8:4-26)
- D Bread and wine (8:28-43)
- E Prayer (8:47-57)
- F Baptism, the twelve disciples, the Holy Ghost (8:62, 70-71)
- G Ascent of Jesus (8:73-75)
- F Baptism, the twelve disciples, the Holy Ghost (9:4-16)
- E' Prayer (9:17-39)
- D' Bread and wine (9:40-45)
- C' Restoration of the House of Israel (Zion) (9:46-69)
- B' Isaiah 52:8-10 (Zion) (9:70-73)
- A' Gentiles trodden down (9:99-106)
- Land of inheritance (10:1)

The central element here is the ascent of Jesus. Ascent or going to a high place would correspond to a mountain which is a common central element of Biblical chiastic structures. Smith has also worked out a preliminary outline of the chiastic structure of the entire Third Book of Nephi with the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as the central element.

Twenty-four shorter chiasmic patterns have also been discovered in Third Nephi including 21 also found in the New Testament. The following example, first discovered by Lund (Matt. 5:12-14), is from III Nephi 5:57-59:

- a And blessed are all they who are persecuted for my name's sake
- b For theirs is the kingdom of heaven
- c And blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake
- b' For ye shall have great joy and be exceeding glad, for great shall be your reward in heaven;
- a' For so persecuted they the prophets who were before you.

Smith lists a possible 229 chiasmic patterns in the Book of Mormon including five entire books—I, II, III Nephi, Mosiah and Ether. The Book of Mormon is one of the world's outstanding examples of chiasmic writing thus providing another parallel between it and the Bible.

CONCLUSION

This has been a very brief review of chiasmic structure and its occurrence in the Book of Mormon. Everyone should be aware of this aspect of the Book of Mormon to strengthen their understanding of its historical authenticity and to provide a means to better understand its spiritual message. Some of the arguments against the Book of Mormon have mentioned its awkward style and frequent repetition. The discovery of the chiasmic nature of the Book of Mormon helps turn this argument into support for the Book of Mormon.

The chiasmic form of writing therefore, takes its place along with other ancient patterns, such as the many examples of Hebraisms and the many archaeological patterns, to show that the Book of Mormon is exactly what it claims to be, an ancient document.

God's creation is orderly. There is no doubt a balance and a symmetry throughout the divine plan for this earth. The abundant use of chiasmic writing among God's chosen people, the Hebrews, seems to be evidence of this fact.

For God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not. Job 33:14 ●

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