1989


Donald W. Parry
Title

Author(s)  Donald W. Parry


ISSN  1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)


Reviewed by Donald W. Parry

Wade Brown, Institute instructor and doctoral candidate at the University of Idaho, has endeavored in this work to format the entire text of the Book of Mormon into various parallelistic and poetic structures. Brown's chief aim is to show that all parts of this sacred book (including the testimony of the three and eight witnesses) consist of Hebrew poetry. His claim is that "over 6,000 identifiable examples of parallel or poetic structures which are common to ancient Hebrew writings" (p. v) exist in the Book of Mormon.

Additionally, to assist the reader in understanding poetic verse, the author has included a commentary, which consists of a brief "Note of Explanation" found in the preface, and a series of explanatory and demonstrative footnotes. However, Brown's comments make up only a small portion of the book. The 988-page book consists primarily of scriptural text.

In order to prove his supposition that the entire Book of Mormon is composed of parallelisms and poetry, Brown has arranged and systematized the printed text of the Book of Mormon into a series of intricate indentations. The author explains that "in this volume the parallels will be visually demonstrated by indentation. When lines begin at the same point across the page it is proposed that there is some way in which those lines correspond to each other" (p. 1). For example, 1 Nephi 13:26 is arranged in a chiastic pattern as follows:

```
For behold they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb
many parts which are plain and most precious
and also many covenants of the Lord
have they taken away (p. 59).
```

Therefore, according to the author's method of line and phrase indentation, the first line of this example corresponds and is in some way parallel to the last line. This is indicated by
having both lines “begin at the same point across the page.” And thus it is with every other line in the text of the Nephite scripture, according to Brown’s system.

Notwithstanding the author’s voluminous presentation of Hebrew poetry and parallelistic verse as demonstrated in this work, serious problems exist, both in his general thesis and in his method of formatting the text of the Book of Mormon. Both of these issues will be examined here.

Concerning the theme of the book, Brown sets forth the unjustifiable theory that the entire Book of Mormon is composed of poetic and parallelistic verses. His assertion is that “parallelism is not found here and there in the Book of Mormon but is the basic format into which the prophets placed their accounts” (p. v). No doubt Brown received this notion from Paul Kraus, a Hebraist who lived more than half a century ago (see p. vii). According to the story, Kraus made an attempt to format the entire Hebrew Old Testament into poetic verse. Considering that there exists more prose than poetry within the Hebrew scriptures, his attempt predictably failed.

Not one of today’s biblical scholars shares Kraus’ once-held belief that the entire Old Testament was composed entirely of poetry. Generally, it is thought that approximately one-third of the Old Testament is written in poetic form. So it is with the Book of Mormon. Its pages feature both prose and poetry, with the former being utilized far more than the latter.

Moreover, Brown claims that he has included and identified “at least sixty” (p. v) different poetic forms in his work. A close examination of these sixty types makes it apparent that only a handful can properly be termed “parallel or poetic structures” (p. v). Obviously, this view is in direct

---


contradiction to that of the author, but it is in line with the scholars of biblical poetics. For instance, Brown’s examples include an ellipsis (p. 5), a metaphor (p. 179), simile (p. 187), triple synonym (p. 8), hyperbole (p. 875), rhetorical questions (p. 31), and correlative word-pairs (p. 7). While he correctly identified these varieties, and while all of them are important figures of speech, they simply are not parallelisms. Nor can they be considered poetry of any type. In identifying them to be such, the author has overstepped the bounds of discriminating scholarship.

On the other hand, Brown fails to include many important parallel types, all of which are attested within the Nephite scripture. Such categories as catabasis, simple synonymous, repeated alternate, antimetabole, cycloides, epible, and exergasia are not included among his sixty models. In connection with this, many of his definitions lack accuracy. His example of chorus (p. 795) has been incorrectly identified, his definition of anabasis (p. 333) lacks completeness, and his description of extended alternate (p. 166) is somewhat ambiguous.

As mentioned above, problems exist concerning Brown’s system of arranging and structuring the text of the Book of Mormon. His method of indenting the lines does not seem to serve its purpose effectually. While he admits that some “mixed forms” of poetry are “difficult to adequately diagram or illustrate” (p. 21), it is nearly impossible to decipher his illustrative maze of poetic verse.

This is due, in part, to the fact that many parallelisms contain subtleties and complexities which are not readily discovered. That is to say, parallelistic structures may contain such word-pair schemes as synonyms (preacher-teacher), antonyms (holy-unholy) and identical words or phrases (child-child); they may also embody such intricacies as complementsaries (bows-arrows), superordinates (wine-drink) and reciprocals (to retire-sleep). Further, such poetic arrangements may contain different inflections of the same root, such as “to judge,” “a judge,” “judgment,” and “judgment-seat,” and gradations, which represent an increase or decrease of the sense or idea.

With this in mind, Brown could have more readily identified the different parts of poetry and thus simplified things by employing bold lettering, italics, and capital letters to feature certain word pairs, keywords, or other associations found
within the passage. The use of underlining would be helpful in underscoring specific parallels between the lines. Brown could have employed many more explanatory notes, abbreviations, and any number of identificatory symbols which would have demonstrated to the reader exactly which poetic structure is being presented. Also, an introductory chapter outlining the fundamentals of biblical poetics would have been helpful.

It should also be noted that Brown has removed all punctuation marks (see his explanatory remarks on pp. 71ff.), attempting to imitate the style and format of the ancient prophetic writings. Presumably, Brown believes that such stichographic formatting will enable the reader to more easily identify the poetry found within the text. However, this seems to confuse the issue, as twentieth-century students are not accustomed to reading such texts.

A final comment about the book is in order. Brown contends that “the arrangement and structure of the language of scriptures has divine origin” (p. iii). Hence he entitles his work The God-Inspired Language of the Book of Mormon. His basic claim is that Jesus Christ, both as a premortal spirit and as the resurrected Lord, taught and revealed his divine word using only poetic phrases and expressions to his prophets of the Nephite and Jaredite nations. Afterward, the prophets followed this perfect pattern and also employed parallelisms in their writings, according to Brown.

The author first asks the question, “How did the prophets come to use this form?” (p. iii). His answer is, “All the individual prophets ... without exception ... followed the form which Jesus Christ presented both before and following his mortality” (p. iii; see also his comments on pp. 52, 58, 59, 61). Of course, it is a basic tenet of members of the Church to believe that the Book of Mormon is the “word of God” (Article of Faith 8). And an important doctrine relates that all scripture is “the will of the Lord ... the mind of the Lord ... the word of the Lord ... [and] the voice of the Lord” (D&C 68:4). But to limit the inspired works of Jesus and the prophets to poetry alone, is too great a liberty to take. Brown’s broad statement does not allow the prophets to use forms other than poetic verse, such as prosaic expressions and utterances.

Considering the recent exhortations by President Benson for members of the Church to read and study the Book of Mormon, and knowing its unequaled importance, Brown is to be commended for undertaking such an overwhelming project.
But the task at hand is far from complete. It will take decades to sift and sort out the poetic verse from the prosaic passage. Students of the Book of Mormon from many different persuasions will likely add their part to the study of scriptural poetics. The work is yet in its beginning stages.