Hebrew Writing Forms

Few aspects of a culture are more fascinating than the development of language. In some societies, the written word was so important that even before the invention of the printing press, handwritten documents were collected in large, extensive libraries. For thousands of years, however, very few people could read or write. Naturally, the invention and development of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg with support from others in the mid—fifteenth century provided the critical breakthrough that permitted more than just a few places such as monasteries and temples to have libraries that included the holy scriptures and other books.¹

Prior to the printing press, learning was passed on largely through oral recitation and memorization. I believe that many of the Hebrew writing forms discussed in this book were designed by ancient religious leaders and early scholars to help students memorize oral or written texts. Another reason for the development of such structures was to carefully design sacred texts so that the revelations of deity could be clearly understood.²

Many ancient Hebrew writings employ either various types of repetitions that aid learning and allow authors to communicate what they feel is most vital to readers or parallelistic structures in which thoughts, ideas, or principles are arranged in word groups that refer back to each other and facilitate learning. Chapter 2 of this book, “Repetitions,” discusses sentences that begin the same, end the same, or repeat the same or similar words within a phrase, sentence, verse, or chapter (see the beginning of chapter 2 for an introduction to repetitions). Perhaps repetitive forms were considered a type of nonrhyming poetry and were composed for their beauty of expression as well as for aiding in memorization. Chapter 3 discusses parallelisms. Chiasmus, arguably the best-known form of parallelism, is discussed at some length. All the examples in chapter 3 have a certain parallelistic structure and are part of texts written by ancient prophets operating under the direction of the Spirit.

Two significant religious books written using Hebrew forms are the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. The book I have written may be an oversimplification of some very complex issues, but by reading the basic definitions given in the following chapters and in the glossary and by looking up the scriptural references, one can quite easily observe the writing forms that Hebrew prophets used in the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

**Purposes of Hebrew Writing Forms**

A vital part of understanding Hebrew writing structures is knowing why the ancient prophets and other authors expended so much time and energy to create the artistic, poetic devices that became standard Hebrew writing forms. Many interesting things can be said about these forms. In this section, I will suggest only a few general reasons, proposed by both LDS and non-LDS scholars, that these poetic forms are important. For purposes of illustration, I will focus primarily on chiasmus, but similar points could be made about the other Hebrew forms.

**Form**

Format is often revelatory. For example, chiasmus is a poetic device that God and his spokesmen apparently have chosen to communicate parts of their message to the people. Many instances of chiasmus can be found in writings from both the Old and the New Worlds.³ The Old Testament includes chiasms that date anywhere from the time of Moses almost to the meridian of time. The New Testament includes chiasms that date up to approximately AD
90. The Book of Mormon, written from 600 BC to AD 421, and the Doctrine and Covenants, written in the 1800s, contain examples of revelations recorded in various patterns of grammatical and topical parallelisms and repetitions, the two main devices used by ancient Hebrew authors.

Clarity

Hebrew poetic forms helped authors and prophets communicate what they wanted the reader to know and understand. The scriptures experienced an extensive review and editing for full clarity before they were inscribed on metal plates or written on papyri or parchment. In other words, the writings that have become our scriptures have obviously been carefully drafted and arranged to meet the high standards that the word of the Lord and his prophets deserve.

Translation Tools

Chiasmus and other literary forms are significant translation tools because they provide a partial yet explicit checklist for verifying the accuracy of the Book of Mormon’s translation into other languages. Because these forms do not generally rely upon rhyme, length of line, or meter, they fit comfortably into almost every language. Hebrew writing forms rely instead on the use of repetitious words, series of words and thoughts, and predetermined parallelisms that can generally be duplicated fairly well in any language. The Lord preserved ancient writing forms in the translation of the gold plates into English by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and it appears equally vital to preserve them as the Book of Mormon is translated into other languages.\(^4\)

Verification of Translated Texts

Knowledge of Hebrew writing forms may also provide a tool for verifying the accuracy of scriptures already published in other languages. By carefully examining passages that in English exemplified certain Hebrew writing forms, one can determine whether these forms have been preserved in the translation.

Substitute for Punctuation

The typical punctuation marks used today—periods, commas, colons, and semicolons, for example—were developed long after the ancient scriptural texts were written. Writing forms were sometimes used by ancient inspired writers as a form of punctuation. These literary forms shape the scriptural text by frequently delineating for the reader the beginning and end of a given passage.

Establish Priorities

To help determine the focal point of a chapter or verse, it seems that ancient authors may have employed the various forms in their writings in order to establish priorities and to emphasize and focus on the items or concepts they felt to be most vital.

Relieve Possible Monotony

The number and variety of these writing structures also relieve possible monotony in what is, by its very nature and by necessity, potentially redundant and repetitious writing. These forms add interest, rhythm, and flow to scripture texts.
Memorization Tools

I believe that these ancient communication forms were established to help students memorize scripture. Ancient people did not have their own personal scriptures, and of necessity they were trained to memorize great volumes of materials. In carefully determined, well-designed ways, chiasmus, alternates, and other Hebrew forms aided and encouraged the memorization of long passages.

Chiasmus has been discovered to be a characteristic writing form of the Quiché people, the most powerful and cultured people in Central America at the time of the Spanish invasion in 1524. The *Popul Vuh*, or Book of the People, is an oral tradition that was written down by a Quiché prince after he learned Spanish. That the book is highly chiastic seems to support the theory that chiasmus was used as a memorization aid. It seems to connect the Quiché culture to the Hebrew traditions of its progenitors.

Beauty

Chiasmus and other such writing forms give inner beauty to scripture. They allow for poetic expression and freedom and are a beautiful art form. Ancient writers often focused incredible energy, time, and other resources into providing a carefully designed, artistic format for much of their scriptural writings. For example, it appears to me that there are at least fourteen different Hebrew writing forms found in 3 Nephi 29:2—9; 30:1—2. As Professor John W. Welch writes, "As with much of ancient literature, the design and depth of the Book of Mormon often comes to light only when the book is studied with chiastic principles in mind." Yes, these marvelous writing forms serve us today as helpfully as when they were initially written.

Provide Interest and Facilitate Learning

The various Hebrew writing forms found in the Bible and Book of Mormon communicate concepts in various ways, facilitating learning and maintaining the reader’s interest. Whereas redundancies and constant repetitions, if left standing alone, have the potential to become tiresome, the variety of forms in Hebraic literature increase readability and make the writings even more appealing. Shakespeare’s masterful use of the sonnet and other such poetic forms added power, interest, and beauty to his poetry for many of the same reasons.

Strengthen Testimony

The number and variety of explicit ancient Hebrew writing forms found in the Book of Mormon are evidence of its origin and truthfulness. Hebraic writing forms indicate that the Book of Mormon is exactly what Joseph Smith, the Prophet, claimed it to be—an ancient religious and historical record written by ancient Hebrew prophets and authors. It contains language forms that were used by prophets and scholars of the earliest Hebrew period but apparently not known to modern America until well after the death of Joseph Smith, the translator of the Book of Mormon. The extensive use of Hebrew writing forms throughout the Book of Mormon supports the testimony that the volume was written originally by various individuals who knew by tradition and training the art of writing in the manner of their Hebrew fathers. Several hundred explicit and beautifully designed chiastic structures remain intact in the Book of Mormon, undeniably supporting the truth that the book is indeed a translation of an ancient Hebrew text, as Moroni explained it to be.
“Enemies” to Understanding Hebrew Writing Forms

In the natural course of translating scripture into modern languages, several things happen that can cloud and obscure what the original authors wanted to communicate. Satan will always be alert to ways in which he can take advantage of such events in order to pervert truth and pollute purity. We are well instructed in the eighth Article of Faith, which declares that “we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” Chiasmus and other forms of Hebrew poetry can be disrupted if the translator is not aware of the carefully designed forms in which the text was written or if the form is so hidden or so subtle that it is not identified as a special and unique form of writing. Listed below are some of the explanations of how the original writing forms are obscured or lost. There is no reason to believe that individuals have consciously attempted to rid the Holy Bible of its beautiful literary forms, although that has taken place extensively.

Versication and Chapter Designations

The Bible and Book of Mormon were not always arranged by chapter and verse as they are now. To reduce long passages into smaller and more palatable bites for our more modern reading appetites and reference needs, the original structure of much of the standard works has been changed to serve other purposes. Often, the poetic structure was set aside when the text was divided. While there are many advantages to versication and chapter divisions, these arrangements also have some natural disadvantages. Divisions can dramatically disrupt chiasmus or other literary forms, and perhaps some of the original meaning can be reduced or lost.

One example of a chapter division that disrupts a literary form appears in the book of Ruth, which is organized in chiastic form. The first two elements of a chiasm in chapter 2 are found at the end of chapter 1:

1:22 A So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab:
   B and they came to Beth-lehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

2:23 B So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest;
   A and dwell with her mother in law.

More examples of versification that disrupts the Hebrew writing forms can be found in Alma 5:4—49. A number of other verses in scripture end before a sentence or concept is completed.

Translation Challenges

Anyone learned enough to be a skilled translator must have a highly developed sense of what is correct English, Spanish, German, and so on. Each of these languages periodically uses parallelistic structures and repetition to add strength and interest. The use of such conventions, however, is minimal compared to biblical Hebrew, which is based on extensive parallels and several thousand repetitions. Joseph Smith successfully translated the English edition of the Book of Mormon from the golden plates. One of the many testimonies of this fact is that the ancient writing forms were preserved in his translation. It appears to me to be a responsibility of translators from English into other languages to follow the example of Joseph Smith in reflecting the Hebrew writing forms that are so well preserved in the Prophet’s translation.

While it is admirable to be sympathetic to the difficult task of translating ancient writings into a modern language, we should also realize that in dealing with scripture (God’s communication with man), if the text is not translated
Not Understanding the Book of Mormon as a Literally Translated Text

The Book of Mormon is a marvelous example of a literally translated text because it contains many repetitions and parallelistic structures common to writings from the Book of Mormon time period (beginning 600 BC). Jewish, Nephite, and Lamanite prophets who were educated in the language of their fathers, “which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), wrote the Book of Mormon. Those who now translate the gospel messages of the Book of Mormon from English to other languages seem to me to have an ethical responsibility to retain intact as many of the Hebrew forms as possible in communicating these messages effectively. There should be no reason to change or obscure the forms that were preserved when these texts were translated into English.

Simply stated, when an ancient Hebrew text is translated directly and literally, the form and style of that unique writing system is retained—at least as much as the target language will allow. When it is translated loosely or nonliterally, the beautiful chiasms, parallelisms, alternates, and repetitions could be injured or, even worse, lost.

Controversy

The study of Hebrew writing forms and Jewish poetry is not without considerable discussion. Arguments, various perceptions, and differing viewpoints prevail. Robert Alter writes, “What are the formal elements that make up a poem in the Hebrew Bible? . . . Common sense might lead one to suppose that the rudiments of an answer would be self-evident, but in fact there is no aspect of biblical literature that has elicited more contradictory, convoluted, and at times quite fantastical views, from late antiquity to the latest scholarly publications.” Almost everyone who has extensively studied Hebrew writing forms and other ancient languages develops his or her own beliefs and determines what the ancient composers of these texts meant. I am thankful that our prophets, leaders, and teachers rely on the Spirit in looking for ways to understand the scriptures more clearly and advise us to do the same.

Overzealousness

Because the study of Hebrew writing forms in the Book of Mormon can strengthen testimony and be quite exciting, a number of researchers and laypersons have become overly enthusiastic, much to the detriment of the subject and integrity of their studies. Similarly, some Latter-day Saints, after learning that the Book of Mormon has marvelous examples of these parallelistic and repetitious writing forms, have become so enthusiastic that they have based their testimonies and life’s experiences solely upon their studies, again, much to their detriment and often to the detriment of their families. Our scriptures are spiritual in nature. They were written under the direction of the Spirit, who assists us in understanding what a wise Heavenly Father and our eldest brother, Jesus Christ, want us to know. Overzealousness can turn a friendly ally of knowledge into an enemy causing confusion.

Loss of Original Word Meanings

The science of comparative Hebrew word meanings (Semitic philology) and incredible archaeological discoveries have increased our knowledge of the original meanings of many words in scripture. There are sometimes still great differences between what authors’ words meant twenty-five hundred years ago and what those same words mean
today. I have come to know, however, that a kind God has preserved the original and vital meanings of these words by embedding them in literary forms that are part of our scriptural heritage in the Book of Mormon and, to a great extent, in the King James translation of the Holy Bible. The repetitions found in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon testify time and time again of what a kind Heavenly Father and loving Savior have revealed.

**Original Lack of Punctuation**

The ancient Jews did not have punctuation as we do today. Often the form itself provided the necessary breaks, hesitations, and phrases, but at times how the message should be structured was still confusing. As Robert Alter observes, “There are sometimes serious questions as to where the line breaks should come and, especially in some of the Prophets, ambiguities about the boundaries between prose and poetic passages,” and accordingly the punctuation that has been added sometimes disrupts or runs contrary to the original form. Again, thank goodness for the Book of Mormon, in which the sense of its phrases is usually unambiguous.

**Declaring a Part of a Text to Be Incidental**

It seems as if many who consider themselves to be sophisticated in scriptural matters attempt to slip around eternal truth by declaring certain sections of scripture to be merely figurative or by discounting parts of certain paragraphs as later additions. This potentially wipes away the very power of the writing forms that were originally used to add force and exactness to scriptural truth. It is also a dangerous procedure to pursue because it keeps the Spirit from fulfilling the vital responsibility to “teach [us] all things, and bring all things to [our] remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (John 14:26).

**Lack of Interest in Studying the Scriptures in Depth**

Many individuals are satisfied to read the scriptures for relaxation, to fulfill personal goals, or for comfort—all good reasons—but they do not realize that a universe of additional meaning, enjoyment, and truth await them if they will penetrate the verses in depth. President Marion G. Romney explains, “One of the best ways to learn the gospel is to search the scriptures. The word search means to inquire into, study, and examine for the purpose of discovering the meaning.” An understanding of Hebrew writing forms can help us find deeper meaning in the scriptures as we search for eternal truth.

**Not Relying on the Spirit**

The study of Hebrew writing forms is an interesting discipline; however, it does not excuse the student from fasting, praying, and relying on the Holy Ghost. In fact, it is only through dependence on the Spirit that eternal truth can be found and applied in life. We are to pray for the spirit of revelation in all that we do, especially as we seek to learn the eternal truths that are found in the scriptures. Elder Bruce R. McConkie says, “It is not reading alone; it is reading, pondering, and praying so that the Spirit of the Almighty gets involved in the study and gives understanding.” Concerning the Bible, E. W. Bullinger, an Anglican vicar from whom we often quote, writes, “The natural man may admire its structure, or be interested in its statements; he may study its geography, its history, yea, even its prophecy: but none of these things will reveal to him his relation to time and eternity. Nothing but the light that cometh from Heaven…. The Holy Spirit’s work in this world is to lead to Christ, to glorify Christ. The Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit; and the same Spirit that inspired the words in the Book must inspire its truths in our hearts, for they can and must be ‘Spiritually discerned.’” I am grateful that, on a number of occasions while I was writing this book, the Spirit whispered strongly whether I was on the right path. I hope that
others will seek and receive similar perceptions through the Spirit of God, confirming to their souls a clear understanding of the full intent of each passage of the holy scriptures.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note that in the eleventh century, the Chinese had developed movable type (see Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia, 1997 ed., s.v. “printing”).

2. For further discussion, see the section “Purposes of Hebrew Writing Forms” (pages 2—7).


4. My point has been independently observed and validated by others, such as Sarah Hatch, “Book of Mormon Poetry in Translation: None Other People Knoweth Our Language” (honors thesis, Brigham Young University, 1997).


9. Ibid., 5.

