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Abstract Alma's sermon at Ammonihah includes a remarkable passage (Alma 13:1-9) that contains a main chiasm as well as four shorter chiasms and four alternates. It also uses synonymia, cycloides, repetition, and an important Nephite idiom (rest). In addition, this passage explains the doctrine of the priesthood and the eternal nature of Christ in conjunction with the priesthood, and introduces the doctrines of a preparatory redemption and the rest of God.

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Abstract: Alma's sermon at Ammonihah includes a remarkable passage (Alma 13:1–9) that contains a main chiasm as well as four shorter chiasms and four alternates. It also uses synonymia, cycloides, repetition, and an important Nephite idiom (rest). In addition, this passage explains the doctrine of the priesthood, the eternal nature of Christ and the priesthood, and introduces the doctrines of a preparatory redemption and the rest of God.

In the middle of his inspiring sermon concerning the priesthood to the apostate people of Ammonihah, Alma uttered a phrase that normally would be used to bring a sermon to a conclusion: "And thus it is. Amen." However, Alma did not terminate his sermon but continued speaking. What, then, was the purpose of using such an expression in the middle of a sermon? In this case the phrase signals the completion of a chiasm, a literary form in which important ideas are presented and then repeated in reverse order.

Literary Structure

The study of the literary structure of the Book of Mormon has taken great strides since John Welch first identified several chiasms

in the Book of Mormon.¹ Noel Reynolds found that 1 Nephi is divided into two parallel sections and that each section concludes with the phrase "And thus it is. Amen."² The identification of numerous chiasmic and parallelistic literary forms in hundreds of passages in the Book of Mormon by the contributors to Donald Parry's reformatted text is a noteworthy achievement.³

The portion of Alma's sermon found in Alma 13:1-9 is a beautiful and complicated work of both doctrine and literature. It includes a main chiasm with eight major elements and a turning point. It also includes four shorter chiasms, four extended alternates, and several other literary forms. The main chiasm that binds the other elements together may be diagrammed as follows:

Main Chiasm (Alma 13:2-9)

- A order of his Son (v. 2)
- B ordained (v. 3)
- C called (v. 3)
- D foreknowledge of God (v. 3)
- E prepared (v. 3)
- F foundation of the world (v. 5)
- G Only Begotten Son (v. 5)
- H high priesthood (v. 6)
- I his rest (v. 6)
- H' high priesthood (v. 7)
- G' his Son (v. 7)
- F' foundation of the world (v. 7)
- E' prepared (v. 7)
- D' foreknowledge of all things (v. 7)
- C' called (v. 8)
- B' ordained (v. 8)
- A' order of the Son (v. 9)

¹ John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10 (1969): 69-84.

² Noel B. Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 58.

³ Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992). The analysis of Alma 13:1-9 in that work differs significantly from my analysis.

The reverse parallelism of these key words in Alma 13:2–9 may not be apparent when one first examines those verses because the key words are used in many other places within those verses. As the analysis on the following pages will show, most of those additional instances of these key words are part of other literary forms that are intertwined with the main chiasm. When those other forms are abstracted out of these verses, the remaining instances of the key words form a clear reverse parallelism.

In explaining the priesthood to the people of Ammonihah, Alma taught the doctrine of priesthood authority by expressing it in the form of a chiasm. He then called the attention of the people of Ammonihah to the chiasmic structure of his sermon by uttering the phrase “And thus it is. Amen.” In written form, the beginning of the chiasm is more difficult to identify than the conclusion because there is no formula that signals the start of a chiasm. As he spoke it, Alma may have indicated the beginning of the chiasm with a gesture or some other behavior that would have been recognized by his listeners.

One may wonder whether Alma produced such literary forms subconsciously without the intention of doing so. Such speculation may be advanced because none of us can tell what Alma’s intentions might have been. However, Alma’s extensive use of chiasms and dozens of other literary forms, and the dearth of such forms in the literature produced by other learned writers, lends weight to the argument that the form and substance of many passages in Alma’s writings found in the Book of Mormon could have been painstakingly crafted to accomplish the parallelistic features we can now discover. Personally I have no doubt that the chiasms and other literary forms found in this passage were intentionally produced by Alma for the benefit both of the Ammonihahites and of latter-day readers.

In discussing this passage of scripture, I will first examine the literary expressions found in this part of Alma’s sermon. I will then discuss briefly some of the doctrinal teachings it introduces. As a disclaimer, I need to indicate that I am not an expert on either literary forms or theology. Instead I am an interested reader of the Book of Mormon who treasures its message and inspiration.

The Overall Pattern of the Main Chiasm

Alma 13:1–9 displays an elaborate and intricate literary structure. The passage is sophisticated and worthy of the same author who gave us the extensive chiasm found in Alma 36.⁴ Because of this complexity, I have not attempted to diagram the passage in its entirety, but will rather identify some of the more important “parallelistic” features. This nine-verse passage contains the following identifiable sections:

Short Chiasms within the Main Chiasm

Several shorter but very interesting chiasms are presented within the structure of the main chiasm.

First Short Chiasm (Alma 13:2–3)

- A And those priests were ordained
 B after the order of his Son,
 C in a manner
 D that thereby the people might know
 C' in what manner
 B' to look forward to his Son for redemption.
 A' And this is the manner after which they were ordained

Second Short Chiasm (Alma 13:3)

- A on account of their exceeding faith and good works;
 B in the first place being left to choose good or
 evil;
 B' therefore they having chosen good,
 A' and exercising exceeding great faith,

Third Short Chiasm (Alma 13:3–4)

- A are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling
 B which was prepared with, and according to,
 B' a preparatory redemption for such.
 A' And thus they have been called to this holy calling

⁴ On the structure of Alma 36, see John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in Alma 36” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 49–51.

Fourth (Split) Chiasm (Alma 13:4–5)

- A on account of the hardness of their hearts
and the blindness of their minds [synonymia],
- B while, if it had not been for this they might have
had as great privilege as their brethren.
- B' Or in fine, in the first place they were on the same
standing with their brethren;
- a thus this holy calling
- b being prepared
- c from the foundation of the world
- A' for such as would not harden their hearts,

These chiasms require little comment. They are short but generally clear and easily identifiable. The last (fourth) short chiasm is split or segmented by the insertion of an extended alternate before the closing element is presented.

Extended Alternates

An extended alternate is a literary form in which three or more ideas or elements are presented and then repeated in the same order. In Alma 13:1–9, four extended alternates are presented, including an alternate to introduce the main chiasm and three other alternates presented within the main chiasm.

First Alternate (Alma 13:1)

- a And again, my brethren, I would cite your minds forward
- b to the time when the Lord God
- c gave these commandments unto his children;
- a and I would that you should remember
- b that the Lord God
- c ordained priests, after his holy order

Second Alternate (Alma 13:1–2)

- a ordained priests, after his holy order
- b which was after the order of his Son,
- c to teach these things unto the people.

- a And those priests were ordained
- b after the order of his Son
- c that thereby the people might know

Third (Split) Alternate (Alma 13:3, 5)

- a being called
- b and prepared
- c from the foundation of the world . . .
- a thus this holy calling
- b being prepared
- c from the foundation of the world

Fourth (Split) Alternate (Alma 13:6, 8)

- a And thus being called by this holy calling,
- b and ordained
- c unto the high priesthood . . .
- a being called with a holy calling,
- b and ordained with a holy ordinance,
- c and taking upon them the high priesthood of
 the holy [repetition] order,
- a which calling,
- b and ordinance,
- c and high priesthood,

I have called the third and fourth extended alternates “split alternates” because the second repetition of the components of the alternate is intentionally divided or separated from the first presentation of these elements. This gives the passage a “musical” and creative feeling much as a refrain is played over and over in a somewhat unpredictable manner.

Synonymia

Synonymia is a literary form in which the author presents a series of words or phrases that are synonyms or have complementary meanings. The following synonymia are found in this passage.

while others would reject the Spirit of God
 on account of the hardness of their hearts
 and the blindness of their minds (Alma 13:4)

who is full of grace,
 equity,
 and truth (Alma 13:9)

The expression “hardness of heart” is a Hebrew and Nephite idiom, an expression that doesn’t mean exactly what it says but has symbolic significance. The words *reject*, *hardness*, and *blindness* all mean essentially the same thing. By presenting two synonyms of *reject*, Alma emphasizes the significance of the rejection of the spirit of God. On the other hand, *grace*, *equity*, and *truth* are not identical but are used in a complementary manner. Such “complementary triples,” as I call them, are found numerous times in the Book of Mormon and help us to understand that gospel principles complement and support each other.

Cycloides

Cycloides is the repetition of a phrase in a circular or cyclical fashion, often in an unpredictable manner. This literary form is well represented by the following phrases, which are almost identical and which occur in three contiguous verses.

being without beginning of days or end of years
 (Alma 13:7)
 is without beginning or end (Alma 13:8)
 who is without beginning of days or end of years
 (Alma 13:9)

The doctrinal significance of these phrases will be discussed below.

Repetition

Repetition involves duplicating or reiterating a word many times in a single passage of scripture. This serves to emphasize the word and bring it to the attention of the hearer or reader.

However, such repetition also violates traditional English standards of writing that caution against repeating a word frequently. In the nine verses of this passage, the following words are repeated as indicated:

- “calling” (7 times) and “called” (5 times)
- “holy” (11 times)
- “ordained” (6 times) and “ordinance” (3 times)
- “order” (8 times)
- “priesthood” (4 times) and “priests” (3 times)
- “Son” (6 times)
- “prepared” (5 times) and “preparatory” (1 time)
- “God” (5 times)
- “manner” (3 times)
- “faith” (3 times)
- “foundation of the world” (3 times)
- “beginning and end” (3 times)

Discussion of Literary Forms

The inclusion of four smaller chiasms and four alternates within the main chiasm is not unusual in the Book of Mormon.⁵ However, this passage is augmented with interesting combinations. The main chiasm is introduced with an extended alternate. One extended alternate is linked to a second alternate, with the last line of the first alternate serving as the first line of the second alternate. Again this combination of styles is not unusual in the Book of Mormon.⁶ Further, other parallel elements such as synonymia, cycloides, and repetition are introduced.

Another significant aspect of this passage is the overlapping of several literary elements. A form such as a smaller chiasm will begin and then be interrupted by another form, usually an alternate. Then the suspended chiasm is completed. The contrast created by this intermingling of literary forms is exceptional. Every word seems to be where Alma intended it to be, yet some

⁵ See Parry, *Book of Mormon Text Reformatted*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, especially the diagrams of Alma 30:4–12, Alma 29:1–7, and Alma 29:8–17, for example.

words are repeated again and again for emphasis. The passage brings to mind a Bach fugue with counterpoint and contrast.

The Parry book identifies another complex chiasm in the last half of the larger chiasm that extends into verse 10, that is, past the formulaic conclusion of the main chiasm.⁷ This latter chiasm is linked to the fourth short chiasm and also encompasses several parallel forms. For the sake of brevity it can be outlined as follows:

- A ordained
- B holy order
 - C a high priesthood
 - b order of his Son
 - c without beginning of days or end of years
 - D ordained
 - d calling
 - e ordinance
 - f high priesthood
 - d calling
 - e ordinance
 - f high priesthood
 - C' a high priests
 - b order of the Son
 - c without beginning of days or end of years
- B' holy order
- A' ordained

This chiasm is similar to others identified in merging chiasmic and parallel literary forms.⁸ Alma did not waste words, but instead combined many literary forms into a tightly woven fabric with significance and beauty.

Doctrinal Principles in Alma's Sermon

Alma's purpose was not just to produce poetry or sophisticated literary forms. His primary purpose was to teach

⁷ Ibid, 227.

⁸ Ibid., 260, 269, 281–82, 351–52, 429.

gospel principles to a fallen people who were led by corrupt lawyers and other so-called intellectuals. Such men almost certainly would not accept the simple truths of the gospel as taught by a humble servant of God, even one who had been their chief judge. Alma was preaching to a hostile audience, he was in personal danger, and his situation required that his words be spiritual in content but also captivating and appealing in presentation. I believe Alma used language and literary forms that were familiar and easily recognized by his audience, yet at the same time would be so crafted as to impress, fascinate, and influence them.

There need be no conflict between the literary expression of gospel truths and the truths themselves. Other scriptures, both ancient and modern, make extensive use of literary expressions to teach gospel principles. Most notably, the Old Testament is poetic to its very core, and Alma's listeners were biological and cultural descendants of the Israelite prophets who wrote the Old Testament.

In the remainder of this article I will discuss the doctrinal rather than the literary aspects of Alma's sermon, with special reference to the doctrines of the priesthood, the meaning of the phrase "without beginning of days or end of years," the doctrine of a preparatory redemption, and the rest of God.

The Priesthood

The major elements of the chiasm emphasize the important ideas Alma wished the Ammonihahites and readers today to know about the priesthood.⁹ These elements—order of his son, ordained, called, foreknowledge of God, prepared, foundation of the world, Only Begotten Son, and high priesthood—reveal and teach much about the priesthood. They tell us, first, that the

⁹ For thorough discussions of the doctrine of the priesthood, see John W. Welch, "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13-19," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:238-72, and Robert W. Millet, "The Holy Order of God," in *The Book of Mormon: Alma: The Testimony of The Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 61-68.

priesthood is named after the Son of God. The priesthood in the Book of Mormon is referred to simply as "the order" or "his order." In the latter days, the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith a pattern for naming and understanding the priesthood.¹⁰

Alma's sermon explains that people who accept the priesthood in mortality were called and prepared to accept it before the foundation of the world and with the foreknowledge of God. Both in this world and in the preexistence, men were "left to choose good or evil," and "having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith," were called to hold the priesthood. These may be the clearest verses in the Book of Mormon concerning the doctrine of the preexistence and of the eternal nature of human agency.¹¹

The priesthood is received through ordination in a public manner so that all people are able to recognize and accept the priesthood and those who hold it. Further, this ordination is done in such a way that "the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption" (Alma 13:2). A close connection exists between the ordinances of the priesthood and the redemptive sacrifice of the Savior. Finally, the passage teaches that the priesthood is a calling received from the presiding priesthood authority.

Without Beginning of Days or End of Years

The phrase *without beginning of days or end of years* is a poetic phrase that means eternal, infinite, and immortal. It is repeated three times in the form of a refrain or *cycloides*. Alma used the phrase not only for doctrinal instruction but also for emphasis and contrast. Its repetition serves not only to accentuate the eternal nature both of Christ and the priesthood, but also to introduce another poetic element into the main sermon.

Each time the meaning is slightly different. The last time this phrase is used, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is eternal or without beginning and end. In the first two uses, the reference is to the priesthood. The higher priesthood, being the priesthood after the order of the Son, is also eternal, as is the "calling, and ordinance"

¹⁰ Doctrine and Covenants 107:1-4.

¹¹ See Abraham 3:22-26 and Millet, "Holy Order," 69.

of the priesthood. The eternal nature of God, of the Son, and of the priesthood is thus clearly taught in these passages. Further, one of the great contributions of the revelations given to the prophet Joseph Smith is the knowledge that all human beings are coeternal with God (D&C 93:29). Thus all of God's children also are "without beginning of days or end of years."

The Doctrine of a Preparatory Redemption

Alma used the phrase "preparatory redemption," but he did not elaborate on this doctrine. While its meaning is central to the message of Alma's sermon, we are left to ponder the eternal significance of this phrase. Teachings found in both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants enable us to understand this comforting doctrine. In his sermon on the atonement found in 2 Nephi 9, Jacob described what would happen to all of us upon our deaths if there had been, or was not to be, an atonement.

O the wisdom of God, his mercy and grace! For behold, if the flesh should rise no more our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more.

And our spirits must have become like unto him, and become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself. (2 Nephi 9:8-9)

According to Jacob, if there had been no atonement, as soon as we experience death in mortality our spirits would go to be with Satan. We would become like those spirits who initially followed Satan and became his "angels" and who are in a state of misery. Like them, we would be shut out from the presence of God.

Was this the situation of the people who died before the Savior's atonement took place in the meridian of time? Did the spirits of people who died before the redemption go to live with Satan? No. Instead their spirits were received into paradise or spirit prison, depending on their righteousness in mortality (Alma 40:11-14).

As revealed to President Joseph F. Smith (D&C 138), at the time of the atonement and death of Christ, an innumerable company of the spirits of the just were gathered together in one place. They were awaiting the advent of the Son of God and were filled with joy and gladness while anticipating the day of their deliverance from the bands of death. When Christ appeared to them in the spirit world, they rejoiced in their redemption, their countenances shone, and they sang praises unto Christ's holy name (D&C 138:12–24). Rather than being with Satan, the spirits of the just were in paradise awaiting the visit of Christ and their own resurrection. While this revelation specifically applies to the spirits of the just, or people who lived righteous lives in mortality, there is no indication that, before Gethsemane, the spirits of either good or evil persons were consigned to outer darkness to live with Satan.

This leads to the conclusion that the atonement of Christ had *prior* effects, or effects antecedent to the actual time of his atonement. These prior effects may be called a “preparatory redemption.” The spirits of those who died before Christ's death were saved from the awful effects of sin and death and they were able to be in paradise (or prison) rather than in outer darkness. They were not resurrected until Christ's resurrection, because Christ was the “firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20; 2 Nephi 2:8). But there was a preparatory redemption so that the full effects of spiritual death were not visited upon them.

This doctrine was explained further by King Benjamin in his great sermon to the people of Zarahemla about 124 B.C., that is, before the atonement of Christ.

And the Lord God hath sent his holy prophets among all the children of men, to declare these things to every kindred, nation, and tongue, that thereby whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might *receive remission of their sins*, and rejoice with exceeding great joy, *even as though he had already come among them*. (Mosiah 3:13)

Time seems to have been an important element in the resurrection, so that all who died before the resurrection of Christ could not be resurrected until after he was resurrected. But time

seems to have had no effect on the spiritual redemption. The redemption of Christ had preparatory effects, or effects prior to the time of the atonement of Christ.

The Rest of God

Often the most significant aspect of any chiasm is the "turning point," the word or phrase that comes at the middle of the chiasm. Alma chose as his turning point the word "rest," which is referred to in other places as "my rest," the "rest of God," or "the rest of the Lord."¹² The rest of God is defined in D&C 84:24 as "the fulness of his glory," by which we may infer that people who enter into the rest of God are able to live in the presence of God in the "fulness of his glory." Let us examine further the meaning of this passage.

And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God.

Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.

And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh;

For without this no man can *see the face of God*, even the Father, and live.

Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that *they might behold the face of God*;

But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his *rest* while in the wilderness, *which rest is the fulness of his glory*. (D&C 84:19–24)

¹² See Millet, "Holy Order," 71–75, and Robert J. Matthews, "The Probationary Nature of Mortality," in *The Book of Mormon: Alma*, 57–60.

These verses indicate a connection between seeing the face of God, having the power of the priesthood, having the key of the knowledge of God, and entering into the rest of God.

Alma also understood that entering into the rest of God meant seeing the face of God and experiencing his fulness, and that this could only be accomplished through the power of the higher priesthood. In the broader context within which Alma's sermon on priesthood appears, Alma referred to *rest* four times before the sermon (in Alma 12:34–37) and four times in the concluding portions of the sermon (Alma 13:12, 13, 16, and 29). Alma consciously emphasized the word “rest,” repeating it again and again to accentuate the importance of the concept.

In a sense, the word *rest* is an idiom in that its meaning is broader than the word implies. Rest doesn't just refer to lying in bed or doing no work. Rest is possible only through the atonement of Christ and is earned through faith, repentance, and not hardening our hearts (Alma 12:37). Later, in his sermon to his son Corianton concerning life after death, Alma expounded on the term *rest* (Alma 40:11–12). The Savior also discussed rest in his final recorded visit to the twelve disciples (3 Nephi 27:19). Another indicator of the significance of the term *rest* to Book of Mormon prophets is found in the last verse of the book of Enos, in which the prophet Enos bids farewell to his people and expresses his assurance of eternal life.

And I soon go to the place of my *rest*, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall *rest*. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall *I see his face* with pleasure, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen. (Enos 1:27)

These scriptural passages afford the hope and comfort that all the faithful saints who have been valiant in the service of God and who have kept his commandments and loved their fellow beings may confidently look forward to the rest of God.

Conclusion

Alma 13:1–9 is a complex and significant literary and doctrinal passage. It teaches the tenets of the priesthood and its connection to the atonement, to the preexistence, and to faith and obedience. It also introduces the doctrines of the preparatory redemption and of the rest of God. Alma's sermon not only expresses important doctrinal teachings in a relatively short space, but it also presents these teachings within a passage of exceptional literary beauty and complexity. It is my wish that readers of the Book of Mormon may find inspiration, instruction, and wisdom as they study and ponder this beautiful passage of scripture.