



7-31-1997

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Barney, Kevin L. (1997) "Divine Discourse Directed at a Prophet's Posterity in the Plural: Further Light on Enallage," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol6/iss2/11>

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FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

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Title Notes and Communications: Divine Discourse
Directed at a Prophet's Posterity in the Plural: Further
Light on Enallage

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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 229-34.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract A follow-up on a previous article on enallage provides further strength for a pattern of a speech to a prophet in which later verses seem to be addressed to both the prophet and his posterity by use of the plural *ye*.

NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

Divine Discourse Directed at a Prophet's Posterity in the Plural: Further Light on Enallage

Kevin L. Barney

Recently I had an experience that suggested this brief addendum to my essay on enallage in the Book of Mormon.¹ Enallage, which is Greek for "interchange," refers to a syntactic device that is fairly common in the Old Testament, where an author intentionally shifts from the singular to the plural (or *vice versa*) for rhetorical effect. I happened to be reading Genesis 17² one evening, when I became intrigued by what I found in verses 9 through 13:

[9] And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep [*we'attāh . . . tišmōr*] my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee [*'attāh wezar'ākā 'āchāreykā*] in their generations. [10] This is my covenant, which ye shall keep [*tišmerū*], between me and you [*ūbēnēkem*] and thy seed after thee [*zar'ākā 'āchāreykā*]; Every man child among you [*lākem*] shall be circumcised. [11] And ye shall circumcise [*ūnemaltem*] the flesh of

¹ See Kevin L. Barney, "Enallage in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 113–47.

² My selection of Genesis 17 was not quite random. I had been researching Joseph Smith's experience in learning Hebrew, and we know from his Ohio journal that Genesis 17 is one of the chapters the Prophet actually read in Hebrew. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:186.

your foreskin [*ʿarlatēkem*]; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you [*ûbênêkem*]. [12] And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you [*lākem*], every man child in your generations [*leḏōrōtēkem*], he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed [*mizzārʿākā*]. [13] He that is born in thy house [*bētēkā*], and he that is bought with thy money [*kašpʿkā*], must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh [*biḥsarekem*] for an everlasting covenant.

The distribution of the singular and plural forms in this passage is illustrated by the following table:

Verse	Number of Singular Forms	Number of Plural Forms
9	5	0
10	2	3
11	0	3
12	1	2
13	2	1

A trip to the library revealed that, while most commentators completely fail to mention this numerical variation, those who do mention it account for it in one of two ways. Some claim that the verses are in disarray, and that an earlier stratum of a more general nature has been swelled by a subsequent stratum of more explicit directives.³ Others, without actually using the term, see the numerical variation in these verses as an instance of enallage.⁴

³ So, for example, Peter Weimar, "Gen 17 und die priesterschriftliche Abrahamgeschichte," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100 (1988): 22–60, especially 28–31. Compare the discussion under "Intentional Redactional/Scribal Influence" in Barney, "Enallage," 121–22.

⁴ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1930), 293–94, accounts for the numerical variation by referring to the "legal style" of the section; he suggests that "and thy seed after thee" in verse 10 may perhaps be "a gloss . . . due to confusion between the legislative standpoint of 10ff. with its plural address, and the special communication to Abraham." Compare the discussion of the legislative use of enallage in Barney, "Enallage," 122–24. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters*

Whether we see the passage as a unified composition or whether we see the priestly writer as incorporating into the passage a legal specification based on its "utterly impersonal legal style,"⁵ the meaning of the finished version should be clear to us today. Although God was speaking to Abraham alone, when he describes the requirements of his covenant he changes to a plural form of address, so as vividly and directly to address not only Abraham, but also his posterity, as if they were actually present.

I must have read this passage at least a dozen times in English in the past, but I never before noticed the numerical variation in the English pronouns between the singular *th*-forms (as in "thou shalt keep my covenant") and the plural *y*-forms (as in "which ye shall keep"). Because in modern English *y*-forms have become invariable as to number, enallage is generally lost by modern English translations. Although it is discernible in the King James Version due to that version's use of archaic pronouns, my experience has been that most people simply do not see it in English (due to either a lack of familiarity with archaic pronouns or the invariability of modern *y*-forms as mentioned above). I personally find enallage to be more easily discernible in Hebrew, partly because the pronominal suffixes and other forms that indicate number in Hebrew fairly obviously differ from one another, but mostly because reading in Hebrew forces me to concentrate on even the smallest textual details.

While working on my article concerning enallage, I was actively searching for examples (working mostly in English and merely spot-checking items in Hebrew for the sake of efficiency); this was the first time that I happened to stumble across a biblical example of enallage in the original language, and I must say that I found the effect quite striking. So much so, in fact, that I thought

1-17 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 468, comments as follows: "We have noted above the shift in this section from second singular to second plural and back: v. 9, singular; vv. 10-12, plural (except for "your descendants [seed] after you" in v. 10 and "your seed" in v. 12b); v. 13a, singular; v. 13b, plural. Most of this section is cast in the plural, and the reason for this should be plain. The prescriptions covered in these verses are to become legally incumbent upon all generations. God is speaking to those who are not yet born. It is going much too far to claim that these verses are in disarray [as Weimar does]."

⁵ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 264.

it likely that over the course of time there would have been scribal pressure to singularize some of the unexpected plural forms. A quick look at the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page confirmed my suspicion, as the Septuagint in verse 10 suggests “*thou shalt keep*” [*tišmōr*] rather than the plural “*ye shall keep*” [*tišmerû*], so as to conform to the singular in verse 9.⁶

The main thing I noticed about this passage was a pattern in verses 9 and 10 that particularly struck me because I had seen the same pattern in several verses of the Book of Mormon. In the first eight verses of Genesis 17, God is speaking to Abraham and establishing his covenant with him. The verbs in this section are for the most part first-person singulars (such as “I will make,” “have I made thee,” “I will make thee,” “I will establish my covenant,” “I will give unto thee,” and “I will be their God”). In verse 9, the subject of the verbs shifts from a first-person singular “I” (referring to God) to a second-person singular “thou” (referring to Abraham) in “*thou shalt keep my covenant.*” This shift is emphatic,⁷ both because the Hebrew actually uses the second-person singular pronoun *’attāh* (which is not necessary here, because the person and number of the subject are defined in the form of the

⁶ Rudolf Kittel, ed., *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937), 21 at apparatus note 17:10α. This is the upper apparatus of less significant items in the old Kittel edition, which I happened to be reading because of its large-print format; this variant is not listed in A. Alt, Otto Eissfeldt, and Paul Kahle, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990), which has a single apparatus. I confirmed, however, that the Septuagint for Genesis 17:10 does indeed read *diatērēseis* (“you [singular] will keep”). See Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935), 22, and John W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 233. Emanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Jerusalem: Simor, 1981), 220–21, complains about the unfortunately common practice in biblical research of approaching grammatical deviations in the versions as if they can be retroverted easily into Hebrew, citing a number of examples (including this passage in the *Biblia Hebraica* apparatus.) While Tov certainly has a valid point, in this particular instance the presence of the Hebrew singular in verse 9 would seem to justify the retroversion into Hebrew, although a simple presentation of the Greek would have been preferable.

⁷ Such an emphasis is to be expected in covenantal language, which emphasizes the promises of the parties to each other. The sense may perhaps be captured by rendering “I, for my part” and “thou, for thy part.”

verb itself), and because the pronoun is repeated a second time following the verb. God then refers to Abraham's posterity in the third person, "and thy seed after thee in their generations." At this point Abraham's seed is associated with the verbal idea, but the verb is not repeated (if it had been, the form would have been third person). Finally, God addresses both Abraham and his seed together in the second-person plural: "which ye shall keep." Thus the pattern is as follows:

1. A divine being or a prophet directly addresses an individual.
2. He addresses the individual in the second-person singular, "thou."
3. He makes a third-person reference to that individual's posterity, "thy seed."
4. Finally, he directly addresses the individual and his posterity together in the second-person plural, "ye."

In my original article I listed a number of possible Book of Mormon examples of enallage.⁸ As I studied this passage in Genesis 17, I realized that three of those Book of Mormon examples, 1 Nephi 12:9, 2 Nephi 1:31-32, and 2 Nephi 3:1-2, each follow this same pattern precisely. This may be illustrated by 1 Nephi 12:9:

And he said unto me: *Thou* rememberest the twelve apostles of the Lamb? Behold they are they who shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, the twelve ministers of *thy seed* shall be judged of them; for *ye* are of the house of Israel.

In this passage, an angel is addressing Nephi in vision. He addresses Nephi in the second-person singular, "thou"; he makes a third-person reference to Nephi's posterity, "thy seed"; and then he directly addresses both Nephi and his posterity together in the second-person plural, "ye are of the house of Israel."⁹

⁸ Barney, "Enallage," 142-43.

⁹ It is possible that the plural *ye* is meant to refer only to the twelve ministers, but logically the statement "ye are of the house of Israel" would apply not only to Nephi and the twelve ministers, but also to all Nephi's descendants. The point of these verses seems to be that, because Nephi's seed is of the house of Israel, his descendants shall be judged by the twelve apostles (directly, in the

This pattern may be represented by the following formula: thou + thy seed = ye. On the strength of the parallel usage in Genesis 17:9–10, I would suggest that those three Book of Mormon passages should be upgraded from possible to probable examples of enallage, and that (1) in 1 Nephi 12:9 the word *ye* is a plural referring not just to Nephi, but to Nephi and his posterity; (2) in 2 Nephi 1:31–32, the word *ye* is a plural referring not just to Zoram, but to Zoram, Nephi, and their respective posterities; and (3) in 2 Nephi 3:1–2, the word *ye* is a plural referring not just to Joseph, but to Joseph, his brethren, and their respective posterities.

case of the twelve ministers, and indirectly, through the twelve ministers, in the case of the remainder of Nephi's seed). Monte S. Nyman writes about this in "The Judgment Seat of Christ," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1995), 202–4.