From Distance to Proximity: A Poetic Function of Enallage in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon

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This essay analyzes examples of poetry in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon that do not conform to the standards to which prose is typically confined. Each of these poems contains a syntactic device that scholars have come to identify by the term "enallage" (Greek for "interchange"). Rather than being a case of textual corruption or blatant error, the grammatical variance attested in these passages provides a poetic articulation of a progression from distance to proximity.
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One of the greatest advancements in biblical studies since the time of Joseph Smith has been the recognition and analysis of poetic conventions in the Hebrew Bible. In recent years, scholars have begun to perceive what should have always been apparent: Biblical poetry operates according to specific literary premises that transcend the norms of ordinary tradition. One such provision includes the precedent for grammatical variance. This essay analyzes examples of poetry in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon that do not conform to the same standards to which prose is typically confined. Each of these poems contains a syntactic device that scholars have come to identify by the term *enallage* (Greek for "interchange"). Rather than a case of textual corruption or blatant error, the grammatical variance attested in these passages provides a poetic articulation of a progression from distance to proximity.
The word *enallage* refers to a grammatical convention that allows an author to switch personage in order to secure a deliberate literary effect. This important example of semantic variance appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. “So *Jeshurun* grew fat and kicked,” sang Moses to the congregation of Israel, “*you* grew fat and gross and coarse” (Deuteronomy 32:15). As witnessed in this Deuteronomic passage, enallage often signifies a movement from distance to proximity. In other words, after speaking of an individual in the third person (e.g., he, she, them) a poet will at times switch to second-person references (you singular, or you plural) in order to portray a special emotional attachment to the subject of his address. While a sudden shift in personage would seem highly inappropriate in prose, grammatical variations such as this actually typify poetry of the West-Semitic sphere. In any case, this deliberate syntactic device seems to contain a highly poetic objective.

Poetic use of enallage expressing a movement from distance to proximity appears in the Song of Songs 1:2: “Let *him* kiss me with the kisses of *his* mouth,” declares the female vocalist of the “Choicest Song,” as she appeals to her lover in third-person address. Then, in an emotional shift that poetically draws the lover into the woman’s presence, she declares, “for *your* love is better than wine.” Many attempts at correcting this apparent difficulty have been suggested over the years. Proposals have ranged from amending the text to envisioning the woman calling out to an assembly similar to the Greek chorus. Yet in addressing this issue, one scholar has insightfully observed, “the assumption of more than two speakers is fanciful; it seems best to leave the text unaltered since enallage (shift in person) is common in poetry.” And what is the poetic function of enallage in this passage? Having initially addressed her lover in terms of a distant relationship, the woman is then free to express her closer or more intense attachment with a more direct form of speech.

A similar example of this poetic technique occurs in Jeremiah 22:24–26. “As I live, declares the Lord, if *Coniah*, son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet on my right hand, I would tear *you* off even from there; I will deliver *you* into the hands of those who seek your life. . . . I will hurl *you* and the mother who bore *you* into another land, where *you* were not born; there *you* shall both die.” In this passage, the divine condemnation conforms to the same literary convention attested in the Song of Songs (though in an obviously negative sense) by first speaking of Coniah in terms of third person and subsequently moving to a more intimate address.

“Truly, *they* shall be ashamed of oaks,” declares the Lord of Hosts concerning the rebels and sinners who forsake the covenant, “because of *their* desire; *you* shall be confounded because of the gardens *you* chose” (Isaiah 1:29). This statement parallels the format of Job’s highly poetic lament: “*He* has truly worn me out; *you* have destroyed my whole community” (Job 16:7). The same pattern also appears in the poetic passage of Micah that praises the redemptive nature of the Lord God: “*He* will take us back in love; *He* will cover up our iniquities. *You* will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19). The progression accomplished in this poem (like those cited above) is meant to be striking: God at a distance; God at a distance; God in proximity.

Perhaps even more significant for the field of Book of Mormon studies is the fact that this well-attested poetic convention occurs in the individual praise recorded in Psalm 23. In this popular Davidic ovation, the poet begins his praise by referring to God in the third person:

*The Lord* is my shepherd;  
I lack nothing.  
*He* makes me lie down in green pastures;  
*He* leads me to still waters.  
*He* renews my life;  
*He* guides me in right paths  
as befits *his* name. (Psalm 23:1–3)

At this juncture in the psalm, the same dramatic shift from third person to second person occurs:

Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,  
I fear no harm, for *you* are with me;  
*Your* rod and *your* staff—they comfort me.
You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies; my drink is abundant. (Psalm 23:4–5)

The significant point pertaining to these examples of enallage is that distance prefigures proximity. In each case, it seems that by beginning a poetic presentation with third-person address, the author is then free to express his feelings for his subject as if that individual suddenly stood in the poet’s presence. This dramatic shift produces an intentional literary effect that allows the subject, when spoken of in terms of third person, to share a direct emotional attachment with the individual offering the oration.9

Interestingly, a similar phenomenon occurs in the Book of Mormon. In Our Book of Mormon, Sidney B. Sperry forever christened 2 Nephi 4:16–35 as “The Psalm of Nephi.” According to Sperry, “this is a true psalm in both form and idea; its rhythm is comparable to the noble cadence of David’s poems; it not only praises God, but lays bare to us the very depths of Nephi’s soul; a study of this psalm reveals how the scriptures delighted Nephi.”10 In support of Sperry’s astute observation we might also add the occurrence of the poetic use of enallage. In a manner comparable to the examples cited above, Nephi begins his dictation by referring to his subject in the third person:

My God hath been my support;
He hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness
He hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.
He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh
He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the causing of them to quake before me.
Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and given me knowledge by visions in the night-time. (2 Nephi 4:20–23)

Like the psalmist in Psalm 23 who commences his praise of deity in the form of third-person address and then proceeds to commend God with second-person references, so Nephi achieves a dramatic shift in verse 30 by changing his praise “about” God to a praise directed “to” God:

Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say:
O Lord, I will praise thee forever;
Yea, my soul will rejoice in thee,
my God, and the rock of my salvation
O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul?
Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of my enemies....
O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!
O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before my enemies....
O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever.
(2 Nephi 4:30–34)

At the conclusion of his praise, Nephi returns to the original poetic formula by referring to his subject in the third person:

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh.
Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss.
(2 Nephi 4:35)

After communicating to God in a more removed sense, Nephi finishes his psalm by again speaking directly to God with second-person acclamation:

Therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee;
Yea, I will cry unto thee, my God,
The rock of my righteousness.
Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee,
my rock and mine everlasting God. Amen.
(2 Nephi 4:35)

Nephi’s psalm follows the same literary trend of grammatical variance attested in a survey of biblical poetry. Based on an analogy with the above forms, the switch from third to second person witnessed in Nephi’s psalm can in no way be described as a blunder in syntax. Just as the Davidic psalm progresses poetically from distance to proximity, so the psalm of Nephi provides a dramatic portrayal of the poet’s intimacy with God by following the same continuance. This connection suggests a possible key for unlocking one of the meanings of enallage in Hebrew poetry as a syntactic device that allows a character to progress from a location of distance to proximity in relationship to the Semitic poet. □


62 For a discussion of the hyporicotic nature of names ending in aleph, with an extensive listing of examples, see Avigad and Sass, West Semitic Stem Stems, 471.

63 How the Greek Language Pronunciation of Book of Mormon Names Came About Mary Jane Wooldridge The illustration at the beginning of this feature is Joseph Smith Translator of the Book of Mormon, by Dale Dillou. © Courtesy Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission.

64 Joseph Smith, in a letter to D. W. Booth, Editor of the Chicago Democrat, 1 March 1842, History of the Church, 4:257.


67 Ibid.


70 Skousen, "Joseph Smith's Translation," 27.


73 John Gee, "A Note on the Name Nephi," JFBS 31 (1991): 19 n. 15. Note: "the spelling of 'Lehi' as 'Lehi' in M. J. Holum's interview of David Whitmer, 13 November 1886, in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., David Whitmer Interviews: A Reassessment (Provo, Utah: Grandin, 1982), 210. Holum was a non-Mormon and apparently had never seen the name spelled and thus spelled what he heard. As David Whitmer had 'cut loose from [Joseph Smith and the Church] in 1837' (Cahoon, David Whitmer Interviews, 150) by the pronunciation of the names had not altered from the initial period and thus the present American pronunciation of the names Nephi and Lehi were set within the first decade of the Church" (Gee, "A Note," 19 n. 15).

74 Suggested by a Mormon Students Meet, Deseret Evening News, 25 May 1903, 3-4.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Sidney B. Sperry, Problems of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 192.


80 The author is indebted to John A. T. Robinson for permission to quote from his forthcoming dissertation on the Hebrew alphabet.

81 Anthony W. Imms, General Conference Reports (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1921), 20.


83 Daniel H. Ludlow, conversation with the author, October 1999.


86 Sorenson, conversation with the author, November 1999.


88 Harper, "The Church Publishes a New Triple Combination," 10; Parry, "How Was the Book of Mormon Pronounced: A Guide Developed?" There is no evidence that any research on pronunciation by church members was undertaken.

89 Sorenson, conversation with the author, November 1999.


91 Ibid.

92 Parry, "How Was the Book of Mormon Pronounced: A Guide Developed?"


94 Parry, "How Was the Book of Mormon Pronounced: A Guide Developed?"

95 Hugh Nibley, The Prophetic Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 90.


The Deseret Alphabet as an Aid in Pronouncing Book of Mormon Names Frederick M. Huchel


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3 Not every instance of enallage in the Hebrew Bible conforms to this specific model, (e.g., third person to second person). Examples of the shift from second to third person include Genesis 49:4; Isaiah 22:26; 31:20; 47:20; 48:13; 52:14; 54:1, 11, 61-64; Jeremiah 22:18; Malachi 2:15; Psalm 228. For shifts from first to third person see Lamentations 3:1 and Isaiah 22:29. For an interpretation of the intentional switch from second to third person, see Barry, "Divine Discourse."

4 This literary tool is witnessed in several forms, including the shift from -n to -n to noncompletes that preserves the original notion of either a past or future tense. See, for example, Mosaic Held, "The VTQ-GTI=TIT=VTIT13 Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and in Ugaritic," in Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman Meir, ed. Meir Ben-Horin, Bernd D. Weisbecker, and Solomon Zeitlin (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 281-90.

5 It is hardly surprising to find the poetic use of enallage opening the Song of Songs since this book has long been recognized as the most highly poetic work in the Hebrew Bible. The term Song of Songs (Song of Solomon in the KJV) is an example of the superlative with biblical Hebrew. The title means "the choicest or best" song see E. Kästner and A. E. Cowley, eds., Gesamte Hebrew Grammatik (New York: Oxford University Press, 1910), 431.


7 The last two examples of you in Jeremiah 22-26-26 are second-person masculine plural forms. In this passage, the progres-
sion is from third person to second per-
son, to second-person plural.
8 This verse presents many difficulties. The
above translation reflects the suggestions
discussed in Geunni. Hebrew Grammar,
462. Though one may question the validi-
ty of this reading, enallage is still attested
in the movement from third to second
person.
9 As noted above, the pattern seems to be
too sweeping to be labeled as either con-
cidence or textual corruption.

10 Sidney R. Sperry, Our Book of Mormon
(Salt Lake City: Steven & Wallos, 1948), 110.

Paul Henning: The First Mormon
Archaeologist
Robert W. Fullmer

1 M. Harvey Taylor, "Paul Henning, Early
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W. Ernest Young, "A Curriculum of
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2 Letter to B. Chaff Jr., 28 June 1982,
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3 Among Henning's most important publica-
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Out of the Dust

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9 Richard E. Blanton, et al., Ancient Oaxaca:
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January 1986; he had served as a
Christian missionary among the Aztec
before training as an anthropologist.