



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 11

3-8-1991

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Susan Stock

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Stock, Susan (1991) "The Oral Formulaic Stle of Isaiah and Abinadi," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol17/iss1/11>

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The Oral Formulaic Style of Isaiah and Abinadi

Susan Stock
Brigham Young University

Scholars have done much work to illustrate the Hebrew ties of the Book of Mormon. Such ties manifest themselves in content and construction, in individual transliterations as well as poetic patterns. These Hebraisms occur most often in oral environments, such as the Hebrew and Book of Mormon cultures. Although many people probably could read and write in both of these cultures, their communication retained features of an oral society. Two ancient prophets, Isaiah and Abinadi, display some of these features in their public discourses. These oral characteristics include additive relationships, frequent repetitions, and parallelism. I will look at both Abinadi and Isaiah's use of these techniques.

ADDITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Several practices of Old Testament and Book of Mormon writers support this idea that they were functioning in an oral residual culture. The first of these practices is the additive style of topic development. Instead of subordinating ideas in complex relationships, oral styles use simple, additive forms. These include coordinating conjunctions such as **and**, **or**, **but**, **so**, **for**, **yet**, and **nor**. A glance at any page of the Bible or the Book of Mormon will show an abundance of the word **and**. Tvedtnes explains that "Hebrew uses the conjunction **and** much more frequently than English. It is frequently used at the *beginning* of a sentence, even when there is no reason for linking that sentence up with the preceding sentence" (53). Crowell further states that in Hebrew writing, "there is a dislike to begin a sentence without **and**; even books begin with **and**—such as Ruth, Esther, Jonah, Joshua, Judges, Ezekiel, and Exodus" (1). Out of 83 verses of Abinadi's own words, 53 begin with a coordinating conjunction. And almost every verse contains at least one additive relationship.

FREQUENT REPETITION

Other words frequently appear in Hebraic discourse. Crowell treats several of these, including **and it came to pass**, **behold**, and **even** (2). Tvedtnes adds **yea** to the list and says that these words are "used for emphasis in public discourses" (52). Abinadi frequently uses combinations of these words:

And after all this. . . he shall be led, **yea**, **even** as Isaiah said, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb. . . **Yea**, **even** so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject **even** unto death. . . (Mosiah 15: 6-7)

Not only are particularly Hebraic words repeated, but any idea deserving emphasis. As Ludlow explains, "Many ideas are repeated throughout the scriptures. Repetition is a necessary educational process, whether in learning a new vocabulary word or in understanding complex religious doctrines" (32). Repetition occurs in both Isaiah's and Abinadi's discourse. Isaiah uses repetition in the following verse:

Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; **go ye out** of the midst of her; be ye **clean** that bear the vessels of the Lord (52:11).

Similarly, Abinadi repeats important ideas as in Mosiah 13:3:

. . . for I have not **delivered** the message which the Lord sent me to **deliver**; neither have I **told** you that which ye requested that I should **tell**. . .

Notice also Abinadi's repetition of **the law** in Mosiah 13:27-32, **these are they** in 15:12-14, 24, and phrases such as **the bands of death** and **I say unto you**. This process figures into the poetic technique of parallelism which I will discuss next.

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is a common trait of Hebrew poetry. Ludlow explains why this technique was important in an oral culture:

The ancient poets, prophets, writers, and scribes would assist their followers by organizing their material into an easily remembered form. Old Testament authors often used key phrases or words as verbal flags to alert the listener to important passages that would be coming up shortly in their presentation. They also used memory devices or patterns that made the poems easy to remember and still allowed the composer spontaneity of expression (31).

Parallelism provided this type of device for memory and organization. There are two types of parallelism: grammatical (or form) and semantic. Grammatical parallelism is difficult to identify because its forms often don't survive translation. Semantic is much easier to identify because the repetition of ideas will translate into English (32). Using Ludlow's definitions and some of his examples from Isaiah (32-38), I will identify seven forms of parallelism which occur in both Isaiah's and Abinadi's texts.

1. Synonymous parallelism: a theme of the first line repeats itself in the second line, but in slightly different words:

- (a) An ox knows his owner, and
- (b) An ass his master's crib. (Isaiah 1:3)

Abinadi also uses synonymous parallelism:

- (a) they have hardened their hearts against my words;
- (b) they have repented not of their evil doings; (Mosiah 12:1)

As was mentioned earlier, repetition is an important learning aid and is important in an oral culture.

2. Antithetic parallelism: a thought of the second part of a couplet contrasts with an opposite theme in the first:

- (a) If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land;
- (b) But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword. (Isaiah 1:19-20)

Juxtaposing opposites vividly illustrates the point the speaker wants to make. Note Abinadi's antithetical parallelism:

- (a) Even this mortal
- (b) shall put on immortality
- (a) and this corruption
- (b) shall put on incorruption
- and shall be brought to stand before the bar of God, to be judged of him according to their works
- (a) whether they be good
- (b) or whether they be evil--
- (a) If they be good, to the resurrection of endless life and happiness;
- (b) and if they be evil, to the resurrection of endless damnation. (Mosiah 16:10-11).

3. Emblematic parallelism: the ideas of two lines are compared by means of a simile or metaphor:

- (a) Though your sins be [red] as scarlet,
- (b) they shall be white as snow;
- (a') though they be red like crimson,
- (b') they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

Ludlow shows the way in which Isaiah uses the first three types of parallelism in the above example (33):

- red as scarlet: emblematic
- antithetic
- white as snow: emblematic
- synonymous
- red as scarlet: emblematic
- antithetic
- white as wool: emblematic

Abinadi uses emblematic parallelism as he describes the punishment which will come upon the people:

- (a) I will cause that they shall have burdens lashed upon their backs;
- (b) and they shall be driven before like a dumb ass. (Mosiah 12:5)

The words **like** and **as** usually characterize this type of parallelism.

4. Synthetic parallelism: the second line completes or complements the thought of the first in a variety of possible combinations (question-answer, proposition-conclusion, situation-consequence, protasis-apodosis, etc.). The following verses from Isaiah use both synonymous (ab) and synthetic (AB) parallelism:

A.(a) Enlarge the place of thy tent
(b) and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations:

(a') spare not, lengthen thy cords,
(b') and strengthen thy stakes;

B.(a) For thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left;

(b) and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited.

(Isaiah 54:2-3)

In his discourse, Abinadi focuses on the results of wickedness; therefore, these cause-and-effect relationships appear often in his text:

(a) And then shall the wicked be cast out, and they shall have cause to howl, and weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth;

(b) and this because they would not hearken unto the voice of the Lord;

(b) therefore the Lord redeemeth them not.

(Mosiah 16:2)

Both Isaiah and Abinadi use this technique in their questioning strategies. "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? . . . Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him?" Isaiah asks in a series of questions (40:12-13). Abinadi counters the priests' cross-examination with questions of his own. "What teach ye this people? If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches?" He uses this questioning procedure throughout his discourse. He even quotes Isaiah's own question and answer while using this technique:

Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? (Mosiah 14:1)

Just as Isaiah spends the rest of the chapter answering the last question, Abinadi spends the rest of his discourse answering the question of from what source salvation comes. The question-answer construct is important to the oral-literary style of both men.

5. Composite parallelism: three or more phrases develop a theme by amplifying a concept or defining a term:

(a) Ah sinful nation,
(b) a people laden with iniquity
(c) a seed [brood] of evildoers

(d) children that are corrupters:

They have forsaken the Lord. (Isaiah 1:4)

Each new phrase introduces a new aspect of the idea, broadening (or in this case, narrowing--notice the progression from nation to people to brood) to the speaker's main point. The main point can also come at the beginning of the group (as in Psalms 29:1-2). Abinadi uses composite parallelism to enumerate the characteristics of different people or events:

(a) whosoever has heard the words of the prophets,

(b) . . . all those who have hearkened unto their words,

(c) and believed that the Lord would redeem his people,

(d) and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins. . .

these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 15:11)

And there cometh a resurrection, even a first resurrection;

(a) yea, even a resurrection of those that have been,

(b) and who are,

(c) and who shall be, even until the resurrection of Christ. (Mosiah 15:21)

6. Climactic parallelism: part of one line (a word or phrase) is repeated in the second and other lines until a theme is developed which then culminates in a main idea or statement

(a) Your country is desolate,

(b) your cities are burned with fire:

(c) your land, strangers devour it in your presence

It is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. (Isaiah 1:7)

And the daughter of Zion is left

(a) as a cottage in a vineyard,

(b) as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers,

(c) as a besieged city. (Isaiah 1:8)

As we've seen, Abinadi uses frequent repetitions in his discourse. Sometimes these repetitions create a form of climactic parallelism as in this quote of and commentary on Isaiah's words:

(a) And O how beautiful upon the mountains were their feet

(b) And again, how beautiful upon the

mountains **are** the feet of those that are still publishing peace!

(c) And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who **shall** hereafter publish peace. . . .

(d) For how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings that is the founder of peace, yea, even the Lord, who has redeemed his people. (Mosiah 15:14-18)

Abinadi moves from those who serve the Lord to the Founder of Peace himself; his repetitions set up this transition and reinforce the "beauty" of the scene.

This type of parallelism also manifests itself in the repetition of grammatical units. As Abinadi describes the atonement, he lists its component parts in a series of parallel participial phrases:

And thus God breaketh the bands of death,
having gained the victory over death,
giving the Son **power** to make intercession. .

Having ascended into heaven,
having the bowels of mercy;
being filled with compassion. . .
standing betwixt them and justice,
having broken the bands of death,
taken upon himself their iniquity. . .
having redeemed them, and
satisfied the demands of justice.

(Mosiah 15:9).

This format creates a kind of grammatical parallelism which develops Abinadi's idea. Both Abinadi and Isaiah use another sort of grammatical parallelism when they prophesy of future events using the repeated construct **they shall be**. For examples see Isaiah 13:14-16 and Mosiah 12:2-3.

Introverted parallelism: a pattern of words or ideas is stated and then repeated, but in reverse order. This parallelism is also called chiasmus. Chiastic patterns abound in ancient writings. A simple example in Isaiah follows:

- (a) Ephraim shall not envy
- (b) Judah
- (b') And Judah
- (a') shall not vex Ephraim. (Isaiah 11:13)

Ludlow explains that "chiastic patterns can be expanded to include many verses, whole chapters, even (according to some authorities) groups of

chapters" (37). Abinadi, in his oral formulaic mode, also uses chiasmus to make his point.

- (a) Thus has the Lord commanded me
 - (b) Except people repent the Lord will visit them in his anger
 - (c) He will deliver them to their enemies
 - (d) they will be brought into bondage
 - (e) They shall know that the Lord is God
 - (d') except they repent, they shall be brought into bondage
 - (c') they shall be smitten by their enemies
 - (b') Except they repent the Lord will not hear their prayers and will not deliver them.
 - (a') Thus hath he commanded me.
- (Mosiah 11:20-25).

Chiasmus seems to be one of the most abundant forms of parallelism in the Book of Mormon, and a reason for some evidently awkward repetitions. Included at the end of this paper is an appendix which contains a list of additional chiastic passages which occur in Abinadi's discourse.

CONCLUSION

Abinadi lived approximately 600 years later than Isaiah. Yet their texts bear striking stylistic resemblances. Although culture and language undoubtedly evolved over those centuries, there was an apparent need for Abinadi to teach his audience in a verbally memorable, impressive manner. But not only his use of additive relationships, frequent repetition, and parallelism echo the words of Isaiah. They both have the same message: Christ will come to save his people. This message is worth repeating and remembering.

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APPENDIX
 CHIASTIC PASSAGES IN ABINADI'S
 DISCOURSE

- (a) Priests pretend understanding
 (b) they pervert the ways of the Lord
 (c) if they understand, they have not
 taught
 (b') therefore they pervert the ways of the
 Lord
 (a') They have not applied their hearts to
 understanding (Mosiah 12:25-27)

- (a) If ye teach the law of Moses, why don't you
 keep it?
 (b) Ye cause the people to commit sin by
 your sins
 (c) Know ye not that I speak the
 truth?
 (c') Yea, ye know that I speak the
 truth.
 (b') Ye shall be smitten for your iniquities
 (a') for ye have said ye teach the law of Moses.
 (Mosiah 12:29-31)

- (a) Ye have said that ye teach the law of Moses.
 (b) What know ye concerning the law of
 Moses? Does salvation come by the law of
 Moses?
 (c) if ye keep the commandments ye
 shall be saved
 (c') yea, if ye keep the
 commandments which the Lord
 delivered on Mt. Sinai
 (b') Have ye done all this? Nay.
 (a') Have ye taught the people that they should do all
 these things? Nay. (Mosiah 12:31-37)

- (a) The time shall come when it shall no more be
 expedient to keep the law of Moses
 (b) Salvation doesn't come by the law
 alone, but by the atonement
 (c) The Jews needed a strict law
 because of their stiffneckedness
 (d) All these things were
 types of things to come
 (c') The Jews didn't understand the
 law because of the hardness of their
 hearts
 (b') Not any man can be saved except
 through the redemption
 (a') Moses prophesied of this redemption through
 the Messiah (Mosiah 13:27-33)

[Note synonymous parallelsim within the chiasmus:]

- (a) The Jews needed a strict law
 (b) they were slow to remember
 God
 (a') therefore there was a strict law given to
 them
 (b') to keep them in remembrance
 of God. (Mosiah 13: 29-30)
- (a) The wicked shall be cast out, unredeemed.
 (b) they are carnal, and devilish; the devil
 has power over them
 (c) all mankind would be endlessly
 lost were it not for God who
 redeemed them from their lost and
 fallen state
 (b') he that remains in his carnal state
 remains under the devil's power
 (a') as if no redemption had been made, they remain
 enemies to God (Mosiah 16:2-5)

- (a) They are carnal and devilish, the devil has power
 over them
 (b) that serpent that did beguile our first
 parents which was the cause of their fall
 (b') which was the cause of all mankind
 becoming
 (a') carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from
 good, subjecting themselves to the devil.
 (Mosiah 16:3)