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# Comparing the Rhetorical Style of Nephi's Writings with Near Eastern Literature

Jennifer Austin

## Introduction

A linguistic analysis reveals that Nephi, as well as other Book of Mormon writers, share common structures with other Near Eastern writers. To most people outside of Mormon culture, Nephi is a fictitious character in Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon*. This claim could appear to have some validity, for Nephi had some interesting adventures (killing a man, building a boat and sailing an ocean). If Nephi was created by Joseph Smith, his writings would reflect an English rhetorical style. However, an analysis of rhetoric in the Book of Mormon, the Old Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Egyptian Book of the Dead may provide some evidence that Nephi was indeed a writer from the Near East.

## Parallelisms

Syntax in Hebrew and other early Near Eastern literature is very important. The writers convey their ideas and messages through diverse sentence structures to their readers and listeners. One type of structure is parallelism. Parallelisms are not unique to, but are most characteristic of, early Near Eastern literature. Ludlow (1982) defines parallelism as "a thought, idea, grammar pattern or key word of the first line [in poetry] repeated or continued in the second line" (pg. 32). Although there are many forms of parallelism, I will discuss only four of them: climactic parallelism, synthetic parallelism, antithetical parallelism and chiasmus.

Climactic parallelism begins with a thought in the first line that augments in the second line. Parry (1992) coins climax as "a form of staircase parallelism, because it demonstrates to the reader a gradual ascent through the recurrence of several identical words" (pg. xviii). Among the different climactic parallelisms, two more specific ones that will be addressed are anabasis (staircase upward)

and catabasis (staircase downward) (Parry, 1992, pgs. xxi, xxiii).

## Anabasis

In anabasis, the thoughts are progressing in an upward manner with the final thought being the most important and the highest. One of the earliest forms of Egyptian literature is *The Book of the Dead* (a collection of various papyri). It dates back to the time of Rameses II. One example of anabasis is found in the Papyrus of Ani:

I, even I, am he who came forth from the **water-flood** which I make to **overflow**, and which becometh mighty as the **river** [Nile] (Wilson, 1901, 40).

Here the thought follows from the general term "water" to a more specific term "the river." Furthermore, the thought ascends from "water-flood," a human experience, to the "river Nile," which carries a religious connotation in the Egyptian culture.

Isaiah uses many parallelisms in his works, including anabasis. One example from Isaiah is:

Say to them *that are* of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come *with vengeance, even God with a recompence*[sic]; he will come and **save** you. (Isaiah 35:4)

In this example, God is promised to come with a vengeance on the enemy. Then he is to come to recompense for Israel's losses, and finally, the real reason for his coming is for salvation. Knowing that Nephi looked to Isaiah as a model for his works<sup>1</sup>, it is not surprising that Nephi also uses anabasis in his own writings. For example:

*And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which*

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I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands. (1 Nephi 2:20)<sup>2</sup>

According to Nephi and the way he writes, the Lord first promises prosperity (a general term). Then he promises a land of promise followed by a land that the Lord has chosen for Lehi and his descendants. Finally, we see that the Lord will lead them to the best land of all lands.

### Catabasis

Catabasis is the opposite of anabasis in the respect that the culmination of thought is in a downward progression, with the most important thought being the "lowest." The Old Testament prophet Amos used catabasis in his works. One example is:

Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdsman, and a gatherer of sycamore [sic] fruit: (Amos 7:14)

Amos uses nouns to lead his thought from prophet (a high standing spiritually) to gatherer of a sycamore fruit (a low standing socially), to show his modesty. In 2 Nephi, chapter two, Nephi paraphrases his father's blessing to Jacob. In this passage Nephi uses catabasis to show something about the state of man:

And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good and become miserable forever. (2 Nephi 2:5)

Nephi is careful to use adjective phrases in showing how important the law is for man's future eternal state. For, as Nephi teaches (through the "staircase downward"), violation of the law brings misery.

Looking at the Dead Sea Scrolls, we can find examples of catabasis. To the people in the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Community Rule reflected their commitment to each other and to their religion<sup>3</sup>. In this example we see a repentant soul confessing to his peers:

As for me, I belong to wicked mankind to the company of ungodly flesh. My iniquities, rebellions, and sins, together with the perversity of my heart, belong to the company of worms and to those who walk in darkness (Vermes, 1962, 93).

It is obvious that the thought descends from "wicked mankind," connoting the base nature of man, to "company of worms" and "walking in darkness," which lends one to think of the absolute lowest state of evil.

### Synthetic Parallelism

Another form of parallelism shared by Nephi and his contemporaries is synthetic parallelism. In

this parallelism, the second phrase complements or completes the thought of the first phrase (Ludlow, pg. 33). Isaiah uses synthetic parallelism in his prophecy:

The earth is also defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. (Isaiah 24:5)

Thus, the thought in line 1 (the earth being defiled) is subsequently completed (the people have broken their covenants).

The Damascus Rule, a manuscript supposedly written in Damascus, is part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The author(s) of this manuscript appear to interpret Biblical writings. In the following example of synthetic parallelism in the Damascus Rule, the author(s) are commenting on Deuteronomy:

Because God loved the first who testified in His favour, so will he love those who come after them, for the Covenant of the fathers is theirs (Vermes, 1962, 105-6).

Thus we see that the thought in the first line is complemented in the second line and completed in the third.

In continuing his paraphrase of Lehi, Nephi also employs synthetic parallelism in a similar fashion:

Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:25)

The first phrase is complete in itself, and the second phrase complements and adds more meaning to the first.

### Antithetical Parallelism

One of the more common parallelisms in early Near Eastern literature is antithetical parallelism. This sentence structure contains opposing words describing the same subject, and the sentence usually contains key words such as "but" and "therefore." Isaiah again has a good example:

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men. (Isaiah 29:13)

We see that the praising of God mentioned in the first few lines is opposed by the intents of their hearts mentioned subsequently. Nephi employs this parallelism in a textbook manner:

Ye are swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God. (1 Nephi 17:45)

Nephi has clearly used opposing thoughts to convey his message. The word "but" between these two phrases is a definite giveaway of an antithetical parallelism.

In the Qumran Hymnal, part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find an example of antithetical parallelism:

**Build up** my soul, and **cast** it not **down**, neither be it **left naked** in face of the wicked (Gaster, 1976, 221).

This citation has the qualities of antithetical parallelism because of the verb phrases chosen (“build up” versus “cast down”). It also appears that the author(s) used catabasis to emphasize the opposition to the first thought in the first phrase.

### Chiasmus

The last parallelism discussed that is most characteristic of Near Eastern literature is chiasmus. Chiasmus is a sentence structure inverting key words throughout several phrases or sentences in an hourglass effect. The main point of the idea presented in a chiasmus is in the middle. Ludlow states, “Chiastic parallelism is a common literary and public communications style used by Israelite poets and prophets” (1982, pg. 37).

In observing Egyptian literature, it was found that chiastic parallelism is not unique to Israelite poetry. One example of chiasmus is found in the Papyrus of Nu:

... I have **stood over** thee,  
and I have **risen** like a god.  
I have **cackled** like a goose...I have journeyed  
from the earth to heaven.  
The god Shu hath [made] me to **stand up** . . .  
I bring along with me the things which  
drive calamities as I advance over the pas-  
sage of the **god Pen**;  
thou comest, how great art thou, **O god Pen!**  
I **stand up** in the boat and I guide myself  
[over] the water;  
I have **stood up** in the boat and the god hath  
guided me . . .  
I have **spoken**. (80)

This chiasmus is a praise to the god Pen, the most important thought. A simple form of chiasmus is found in Isaiah:

**Ephraim** shall not envy **Judah**,  
and **Judah** shall not vex **Ephraim** (Isaiah 11:13).

A better example of chiasmus in Isaiah’s prophecy and poetic nature is:

**Arise**, shine;  
for thy **light** is come,  
and the **glory** of  
the **LORD** is **risen** upon thee.  
For, behold, the **darkness** shall cover the  
earth,  
and **gross darkness** the people:  
but the **LORD** shall **arise** upon thee,  
and his **glory** shall be seen upon thee.  
And the Gentiles shall come to thy **light**,  
and kings to the brightness of thy **rising**. (Isaiah  
60:1-3)

Here, the emphasis is darkness and the inference that the Lord and His glory will remove the darkness. An example from the Dead Sea Scrolls is:

If I stagger because of the **sin of flesh**,  
**my justification** shall be  
the **righteousness of God** which endures  
forever.

When my distress is unleashed, He will  
deliver my soul from the Pit and will direct  
my steps to the way. He will draw me near  
by His grace,  
and by his mercy will He bring **my justification**

He will judge me in the **righteousness of His truth** and in the greatness of His goodness He will pardon all my sins.

Through His righteousness He will cleanse me of the uncleanness of man and the **sins of the children of men** that I may confess to God His righteousness, and majesty to the Most High. (Vermes, 93-94)

The ultimate thought here is justification. Even though the author considers himself a sinner, he believes that God will justify him through His righteousness. Nephi’s writings are full of chiasmus. One example is:

For shall the **prey** be taken from the mighty,  
or the lawful **captives** delivered?

But thus **saith the Lord**,

even the **captives** of the mighty shall be taken away, and the **prey** of the terrible shall be delivered; for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children. (1 Nephi 21:24-25)

### Conclusion

Although the evidence studied shows that there are similarities among the writing styles of Nephi and other Near Eastern authors, the study has not been exhaustive enough to make objective conclusions. This study has provided some interesting insights in the similarities of the structures used by both Near Eastern writers and Nephi. Nephi must have been educated in the Near Eastern area (which he claims to have been) because of the structures he uses in his works.

Another conclusion made during this study is that in comparing this syntactic structure to that of the present day and culture, it appears that Nephi, and much more so his contemporaries in the Near Eastern area, held the belief that the manner of communicating the idea was just as important if no more important than the actual meaning of the idea presented.

A question that has been raised during this study (especially since this study of Egyptian literature has been very limited) is: Are parallelisms really that common in Egyptian literature, or (on the hypothesis that Hebrew was Nephi’s first language),

did Nephi carry over a poetic syntactic structure from his first language into his second language, that being Reformed Egyptian?

The fact that parallelisms and the abundance of chiasmus in Nephi's writings are so similar to that of early Near Eastern poets and authors strengthens the conviction that the Book of Mormon, especially Nephi's writings, had to have been translated and not just imagined by the nineteen-year-old farm boy, Joseph Smith.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See 2 Nephi 25:5.

<sup>2</sup>This and subsequent parallelisms cited from the Book of Mormon have been documented by Donald Parry. See Parry in the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup>See Vermes, pgs. 25-29.