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Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon

Richard Dilworth Rust


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Hugh W. Pinnock, a recently deceased member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, spent many years doing what the title of his book indicates: finding biblical Hebrew and other ancient literary forms in the Book of Mormon. The result is a three-part compendium of forms and examples: forms of repetition, forms of parallelism, and other forms.

Although Elder Pinnock refers to there being “at least 240 different defined Hebrew writing forms . . . identifiable in the Old Testament” (p. 50), in his treatment of Hebraic forms in the Book of Mormon he limits himself to twenty-six—seven forms of repetition, thirteen of parallelism, and six miscellaneous forms: anthropopatheia (God and man with similar attributes), numerical parallelism, exergasia (working through for heightened understanding), ellipsis (a leaving out), eleutheria (bold speech), and eironeia (irony: an opposite expression). Forms of repetition include anaphora (repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences), epibole (irregular repetition), epistrophe (similar sentence or clause endings), and amoebaeon (like paragraph endings). A striking example of anaphora is Jacob’s repeated “Wo unto” found in 2 Nephi 9:31–38.
Forms of parallelism make up the main part of the book. These include word pairs, synonymous parallelism, synthetic parallelism (two things placed together to add strength), phrases repeated in order, phrases opposing each other, and chiasmus (inverse repetition). A simple but effective example of antithetical chiasmus is:

A I give not
B because I have not, 
B but if I had
A I would give. (Mosiah 4:24) (p. 94)

Typically, Pinnock provides examples from the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon—as with word pairs such as these:

A before the fierce anger of the Lord
B come upon you,
A before the day of the Lord’s anger
B come upon you. (Zephaniah 2:2)

A I will visit them
B in my anger,
B yea, in my fierce anger
A will I visit them. (Mosiah 12:1) (pp. 52, 179)

A major point of the book is set forth in the preface: “Joseph Smith could not have been aware when he translated the Book of Mormon that it was full of chiasms and Hebraisms” (p. x). These various ancient forms argue that the Book of Mormon “is an ancient Hebrew book that was translated, but not written, by Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century” (p. x). Later, the argument becomes deductive, as with this reference to the form of inverse repetition: “Because the Book of Mormon is a Hebrew-influenced text like the Bible, it naturally contains this form in abundance” (p. 93). While the preponderance of Hebraic forms in the Book of Mormon gives credence to Pinnock’s assertions, I find especially touching his anecdote about a Jewish friend to whom he showed chiasmus in the Book of Mormon.
She told her rabbi, who responded, "Then, my dear, you have found one of God's books because chiasmus is the language of God" (p. ix).

Writing in a friendly, accessible style, Pinnock relies heavily on Donald W. Parry's *Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992) and E. W. Bullinger's *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1968 [first published in 1898]). He relies as well upon ideas from Robert Alter, Wilfred G. E. Watson, John W. Welch, and others. Pinnock says in his first citation of Parry: "I am deeply indebted to Donald Parry" (p. 47 n. 1). Indeed, he is quite derivative of Parry, following a similar order of forms and using many of the same examples.

Although not entirely original, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* is refreshingly clear. Pinnock is obviously a teacher: he is very concerned with communicating clearly. His examples also have graphics as visual aids—for example, line drawings of up staircases and down staircases in connection with anabasis (from the Greek meaning "to go or walk up") and catabasis (from the Greek meaning "going down"). (These forms are repeated, with terms and examples, in the "Glossary and Pronunciation Guide" at the end of the book. There, typically, the author has paired examples from the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon.)

The book has its limitations, though. The scriptural examples are all taken out of context, so the emphasis is on the forms themselves much more than on the effectiveness and purposes of these forms as part of a larger whole. In that regard, I prefer Parry's *Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns*. Simply looking at one example after another is sort of like reading sequentially a book of quotations. Too, despite Pinnock's pronunciation guide, I find myself losing interest in trying to remember the names of the rhetorical terms. (For me, it is simpler to think of "staircase parallelism" than "anabasis.") Still, the book provides a handy and clear guide to some major literary forms found in the Book of Mormon.

I like also what the book does not provide but what it points to. In his epilogue, Pinnock says, "We have merely scratched the surface
of a discipline that can fascinate, inspire, and alter your thinking about the sophisticated writing abilities of the prophets who lived from 4000 B.C. to A.D. 400” (p. 157). Indeed. If it does nothing else, Pinnock’s book could stimulate further study of the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon.

Despite all the books and articles on the Bible as literature, Robert Alter finds that “the telling [in the Hebrew Bible] has a shapelessness whose subtleties we are only beginning to understand, and it was undertaken by writers with the most brilliant gifts for intimating character, defining scenes, fashioning dialogue, elaborating motifs, [and] balancing near and distant episodes.”¹ David A. Dorsey avers that “there is still no comprehensive study of literary structure in the Hebrew Bible and few adequate analyses of the structures of individual Old Testament books. The field of research is still in its infancy.”² If this is true of study of the Bible, then what about the Book of Mormon? Writing about scriptural studies generally, but surely thinking as well about the Book of Mormon, Parry says: “Much work remains to be done in the field of scriptural poetics, including the study of parallelistic and repetitious forms.”³ Appropriately, then, Pinnock predicts that “the study of this art form and writing system will increase in popularity as the years unfold. . . . It is possible that all we now know about how the ancients wrote and the forms they used is just a microscopic percentage of what there is yet to learn” (p. 157).

As far as I am aware, the only full-length treatments of the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon are my book, Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), and Mark D. Thomas's Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives (Salt Lake City:

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³. Donald W. Parry, The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), preface.
Signature Books, 1999). As both Thomas and I realize, a great deal more can be done with this scripture that in some ways appears simple yet is extremely complex.

Pinnock points to a fruitful area in which there is much yet to learn: He recognizes that “many of the Hebrew writing forms discussed in this book were designed by ancient religious leaders and early scholars to help students memorize oral or written texts” (p. 1). Again he says: “The climactic form aided the prophets in clearly communicating the word of God to eager listeners who had at best only limited access to the scriptural scrolls” (p. 83). This is affirmed by Dorsey, who writes, “Texts were normally intended to be read aloud, whether one was reading alone or to an audience. Accordingly, an ancient writer was compelled to use structural signals that would be perceptible to the listening audience. Signals were geared for the ear, not the eye, since visual markers would be of little value to a listening audience.”

This is also true of the world out of which the Book of Mormon comes. It may strike a visually oriented person as incredible that, for instance, the twelve Nephite disciples could hear the Savior’s sermon at the temple and then the next day repeat that sermon to the people, “nothing varying from the words which Jesus had spoken” (3 Nephi 19:8).

While the typical reader of the Book of Mormon is worlds away from this oral-aural mode of transmission and learning, new discoveries of the book could, I believe, come from immersion in this type of environment. One could apply to the Book of Mormon the point Victor M. Wilson makes in Divine Symmetries: “Memory is everything in an orally grounded culture, . . . and memory is cultivated through repetition.” Epic and other forms of ancient literature were created with “balanced sections built around a center, both in the construction of its parts and in the arrangement of the whole.”

Discovery of these arrangements is not easy, though. I can imagine

they would best be found by listening repeatedly to the Book of Mormon without the intrusion of artificial markers such as punctuation—perhaps even of chapter designations (initially provided by John H. Gilbert and later by Orson Pratt).

Pinnock’s four pages on irony point to another fruitful area that is open to much more exploration and analysis.

What Pinnock says of poetry is true as well of narrative structures: It “relied on repetitions . . . and parallelistic, symmetrical structures to achieve beauty, emphasis, and clarity of understanding” (p. 49). Despite his repeated attempts to deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon, Thomas shows the rich possibilities of finding in the Book of Mormon type-scenes and formulaic phrases typical of the Bible. As I do in my chapter on narratives in Feasting on the Word, Thomas finds striking triple repetitions of events in the Book of Mormon. Both of us show we learned from Robert Alter about parallel narrative scenes. This area of interest, though, is far from being exhausted.

Pinnock calls attention to rhetorical figures and by doing so reminds us that as with the Bible, the Book of Mormon is replete with figurative language. More attention needs to be paid, for instance, to metaphors and personification like the following: “The good shepherd doth call after you; and if you will hearken unto his voice he will bring you into his fold, and ye are his sheep” (Alma 5:60). Mercy “encircles them in the arms of safety” (Alma 34:16).

A number of the paired Bible–Book of Mormon examples in Pinnock’s book call attention to the intertextuality between these two works of scripture. Intertextuality within the Book of Mormon is also worthy of further study. Subsequent Nephite prophets, we know, had access to teachings of the earlier Nephite prophets. Alma’s sermons are indebted to Abinadi’s teachings, as are Amulek’s to Alma’s. Steeped in their knowledge of Isaiah, Nephi and Jacob incorporated some of his expressions into their own teachings. A striking instance of intertextuality is the observation by Nephi the son of Helaman (or perhaps by Mormon) that the church was broken up (around A.D. 30)
“in all the land save it were among a few of the Lamanites who were converted unto the true faith; and they would not depart from it, for they were firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord” (3 Nephi 6:14). Thus nearly six centuries later, it is acknowledged that Lehi’s desire for his two oldest sons is fulfilled: that Laman might be righteous and that Lemuel might be “like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 2:10).

A great help to discovering more of the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon would be to understand the book both through prophecy and through being “taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5; see 25:4). More generally, it would help to become widely familiar with treatments of the Bible as literature. Pinnock in his selected bibliography lists six books on this subject. However, a subject search of the library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill finds 142 books on the Bible as literature—most of which, presumably, contain insights that could be applied to the Book of Mormon.

For a God-fearing person, an intellectual interest in the Book of Mormon as literature is not sufficient. Elder Henry B. Eyring is properly aware of the limitations of an exclusively literary approach: “So much of the Old Testament can be taught as dramatic stories, fascinating customs, and beautiful literary forms. But I will sense a greater happiness, a deeper appreciation when I study or teach of times when prophets spoke of Jehovah and when the people received the words and turned toward Him.” Yet properly recognized, the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon are a means of conveying its spiritual purposes. Elder Neal A. Maxwell refers to Mosiah 8:21 (“Yea, they are as a wild flock which fleeth”) and speaks of “verses of scripture which teach while reflecting linguistic loveliness.” Again, he refers to Mosiah 5:13 to show that “important insights about discipleship are embodied and conveyed in beautiful but succinct ways . . . in this inspired

but haunting interrogatory which deals with the essence of failed discipleship.”

Pinnock refers to this linkage of aesthetics and meaning: “The beauty and surprising presence of this Hebrew writing form [chiasmus] in the Book of Mormon appeared to be an almost untapped reservoir of testimony-strengthening material” (p. viii). Indeed, the literary beauty of the Book of Mormon is an essential vehicle for presenting its God-directed purposes—as I acknowledge with the subtitle of my book on the Book of Mormon as literature: *The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*.

It needs to be emphasized, though, that being trained “after the manner of the things of the Jews” is not sufficient. I expect that Laman and Lemuel had this kind of training, yet they were like the people listening to Nephi the son of Helaman: It was “not possible that they could disbelieve” (3 Nephi 7:18), so they became angry. Or one could simply disregard the divine element in scriptures—as do so many scholars.

Finally, Pinnock’s book could contribute to a study of the Old Testament in Gospel Doctrine classes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* has nearly as many examples of literary forms from the Old Testament as it does from the Book of Mormon, and recognizing these Hebraic forms can enhance study of the Bible just as it can of the Book of Mormon.