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2015-04-23

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Gospel Merisms in the Book of Mormon

April 23, 2015

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Accepted for presentation at the 2015 meeting of SBL

This study extends previous work that identifies three *inclusios* in the Book of Mormon, each of which presents the same definition of the doctrine or gospel of Jesus Christ.¹ But none of the three definitions is presented in the way modern readers might expect. Rather, each offers a series of statements focusing on different actions or events that are related to each other as parts of *the way* that leads to eternal life. On first reading, they could easily seem disconnected or even contradictory. But as these earlier studies demonstrate, when all these statements and their repeated elements are examined cumulatively, a well-defined account of this gospel emerges. The process by which men and women can come unto Christ and be saved is clear and multi-stepped. The picture of the whole is almost never fully articulated in one place. Instead, we find a series of partial statements of this gospel—each of which is designed to add detail and complexity. The analysis of 2 Nephi 31 yielded insights about the Book of Mormon’s six-part conception of the gospel of Jesus Christ that apply readily to the other two *inclusios*, and, as will be

¹ See, Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies*, 1990, and “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 68 (2:2015), 218–234.

shown below, to the rest of the book.

While these six basic elements of the doctrine or gospel of Christ are each mentioned multiple times in Nephi's brief exposition, it is only at the end that he brings them all together. In all previous discussion, these elements are stated in terms of a multitude of interconnections between different combinations of two or three of them, statements which gradually deepen and extend the reader's understanding of each one and of its role in the larger process. This mode of presentation makes something else clear: Whenever some pair or selection of these six elements is mentioned, the entire set is implicitly invoked. Each is an essential part of *the way*, and there is no shorter way. When Nephi quotes the Father saying, 'he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved' (v. 15), the reader knows that four other elements—faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, and baptism of both water and of the Holy Ghost—are necessarily implied.²

The 1991 study presented preliminary evidence that this pattern of presentation corresponds to the rhetorical pattern of *merismus*, particularly as it occurs in the Bible.³ In this paper, I will show that this same meristic approach to

2 Reynolds, "Gospel According to Mormon," p. ??

3 I continue to be grateful to Paul Y. Hoskisson who first suggested that I consider merismus as a possible explanation for this pattern in the Book of Mormon.

defining or describing the gospel occurs not only in these three definitional passages, but that it permeates the entire text of the Book of Mormon. From Nephi in the beginning to Mormon and Moroni at the end, hundreds of references to the gospel occur in meristic form. As I have wrestled with this textual phenomenon over the years, I have found that the rhetorical device of merismus provides the most helpful explanation of how these passages work together to convey and reinforce a single message. This is consistent with the fact that students of the Book of Mormon have for many decades been finding striking evidences of rhetorical complexity in the text.⁴

Merismus as a Rhetorical Device

When E. W. Bullinger identified *merismos* as a biblical figure of speech in 1898, he saw it principally as enumeration of the parts of a whole, following the model of Greek rhetoric.⁵ That understanding has been extended considerably by

⁴ Two publications that inspired this growing literature are John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10/1 (1969): 69–84, and Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007).

⁵ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898, repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), 435. See the evidence for Greek rhetoric under *merismos* in H. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “*meris*” (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968), 1104. While the growing school of rhetorical analysis has pointed to the dangers of relying on the categories of Greek rhetoric in Biblical interpretation, the studies of merismus invoked here are drawn from Biblical studies. See, Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998. The

later Bible scholars, and the classic treatment recognized today was published by A. M. Honeyman in 1952.⁶ The small list of subsequent studies are acknowledged in Wilfred G. E. Watson's 1984 guide to classical Hebrew poetry, but he still acknowledges Honeyman's analysis of merismus as fundamental.⁷ In the Hebrew Bible, merismus occurs as concise or condensed expressions that by mentioning two or more prominent elements of a series invoke the larger entity implicitly.

Honeyman explains,

Merismus, which is a figure of speech akin in some respects to synecdoche, consists in detailing the individual members, or some of them—usually the first and last, or the more prominent—of a series, and thereby indicating either the genus of which those members are species or the abstract quality which characterises the genus and which the species have in common.

Symbolically expressed, merismus is the brachylogous [elliptical] use of A+Y or A+B+Y or A+X+Y in place of the complete series A+B+C . . .

+X+Y to represent the collective Z of which the individuals A to Y are

Book of Mormon examples I will identify may suggest some distinctive features of merisms occurring in that text.

⁶ See A. M. Honeyman, "Merismus in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71/1 (March, 1952): 11–18.

⁷ Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984, 1986), 321–22.

members, or the abstract z which is their common characteristic.⁸

Watson elucidates,

when a totality is expressed in abbreviated form, we are dealing with merismus. . . . The significant point is that in merismus, of whatever form, it is not the individual elements themselves that matter but what they amount to *together*, as a unit. . . . Merismus, then, belongs to metonymy (the part for the whole) and is a form of ellipsis, akin to hendiadys. . . . It is the total concept that is important; the components are not significant in isolation.

Merismus, then, is an abbreviated way of expressing a totality.⁹

Of the various forms of merismus identified by scholars, the most common, and the one that best matches the Book of Mormon presentations of the gospel, is the “meristic list,” which tends to have three characteristics: (1) brevity, (2) an implied or expressed totality, and (3) that “the items enumerated belong to the same level.”¹⁰ Understood as a formula composed of six ordered elements, the gospel presented in the Book of Mormon lends itself well to this rhetorical device. By mention of two or more elements, frequently including the last element, a writer can immediately invoke all six components of the formula in the minds of readers.

8 Honeyman, “*Merismus* in Biblical Hebrew,” 13–14.

9 Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 321.

10 Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 322.

A typical Book of Mormon merism states that believing in Jesus (#1) and enduring to the end (#5) is life eternal (#6).¹¹ While repentance (#2), water baptism (#3), and baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost (#4) are not mentioned here, these are all treated as additional essential elements in closely related passages. The presentation of this gospel in the text features abbreviated statements which only reveal the full six elements when the separate statements are considered cumulatively. When we fail to recognize these abbreviated statements as merisms that point to each other and which are intended to invoke the full six-element formula in the minds of hearers and readers, we can rush to the conclusion that the text is not clear or even consistent with itself.

The 2015 *SJT* paper, which updates the 1991 study, identified 150 references to the six gospel elements in the three core passages—as is summarized in the following chart:¹²

Gospel Element	2 Nephi	3 Nephi	3 Nephi 27	TOTALS
Faith	8	15	3	26

¹¹ 2 Nephi 33:4.

¹² This chart was published first in “The Gospel According to Mormon,” p. xx.

Repentance	14	5	9	28
Baptism	19	10	7	36
Holy Ghost	9	8	4	21
Enduring	8	4	7	19
Saved	6	6	8	20
TOTALS	64	48	38	150

The chart reports the items that were repeated in these three passages.

Accumulating repeated items made it possible to identify six essential elements, and then to see that any statement specifying one or more of them implicitly invokes the full panoply as an implied context for understanding that statement. In this paper, I will extend the analysis beyond these three passages to show that this same pattern of meristic or elliptical reference to the full list of gospel elements characterizes gospel discourse throughout the Book of Mormon.

Another level

The way meristic statements of this gospel formula are combined in these three definitional passages goes far beyond any use of merismus that has been noticed in the Bible. In each of these passages, and especially in 2 Nephi 31, the varied combinations of gospel elements are used artfully by the writer to add meaning to the formula itself and to enrich understanding of the interconnections between the

six elements. By using merismus, the writer is able to focus attention in any sentence on two or three specific gospel elements while expecting the reader to keep the whole formula in mind as context for each specific statement. This goes beyond the shorthand or abbreviating function of most biblical merismus by enlisting the technique intensively and pedagogically to expand the reader's understanding of the shared formula—thereby taking merismus to a whole new level.

The first and foremost of these passages is 2 Nephi 31 in which the prophet Nephi quotes repeatedly from a vision he had received over forty years earlier. Here, at the end of his writing, he expands his earlier brief description of the baptism of Jesus Christ, as it had been shown to him centuries before the fact, to now include his experience of being taught the gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ by the Father and the Son, as he heard their voices explaining the baptismal scene he was seeing to him.¹³ In a series of 23 meristic statements of the gospel, Nephi interweaves six quotations from these deities with his own conclusions and understandings to produce what becomes the foundational account of Christ's gospel as it will be taught by all Nephite prophets in the coming centuries.

13 This chapter is analyzed both in context and in detail in Noel B. Reynolds, "The gospel according to Nephi," *Religious Educator*, xxx 2015.

Gospel merisms throughout the text

We have now re-examined the entire text of the Book of Mormon looking for examples of meristic references to the gospel formula.¹⁴ The most complete one-sentence statements of the formula usually only name four or five elements explicitly. Examples include:

3 Nephi 11:32–33: ... the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent (R) and believe (F) in me. And whoso believeth in me (F), and is baptized (W), the same shall be saved (S)....

3 Nephi 27:16: ... whoso repenteth (R) and is baptized in my name (W) shall be filled (H); and if he endureth to the end (E), behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world (S).

3 Nephi 30:2: Turn, all ye Gentiles, from your wicked ways; ...and from all your wickedness and abominations, and come unto me (F, R), and be baptized in my name (W), that ye may receive a remission of your sins, and be filled with the Holy Ghost (H), that ye may be numbered with my people

¹⁴ Most of the essential detail work in compiling these examples was performed by Gage Love who worked with me as a student research assistant.

who are of the house of Israel (S).

Already in these clear examples, we note the need for some interpretation. Relying on other examples of Book of Mormon usage, we can interpret “come unto me” as a reference to faith and repentance. And those that are held “guiltless before the Father” at the judgment day are saved. And we know that when the repentant are “filled,” this refers to the Holy Ghost. And it is the saved who are “numbered with my people.” As it turns out, a very large glossary is required to identify all the alternative terminology that is used to refer to the basic six gospel elements. And the predominant use of these synonyms may go a long way toward explaining why the large numbers of meristic statements of the gospel in the Book of Mormon text go largely unnoticed. And the meristic character of the examples is clear. The absence of one or two of the basic gospel elements in each could never be taken as a suggestion that all six are not implied in this particular reference. I will insert a preliminary glossary at this point to facilitate interpretation of the examples that will appear in the remainder of the paper. Note that negatives of these terms are often used to evoke the same element by reverse implication.

Glossary of gospel terminology.

Faith in Jesus Christ (F): relying upon the merits of him who is mighty to save,

believing in Christ and the Father, believe on his name, giving heed to the Lord's servants

Repentance (R): humbling oneself before the Father, covenanting to obey the commandments, being unclean (not repentant)

Baptism of Water (W): Witnessing to the Father that one has repented and will obey his commandments, taking the name of Christ upon one's self

Baptism of Fire and of the Holy Ghost (H): being filled, receiving the remission of sins, receiving these things

Enduring to the End (E): following the straight and narrow path, faithfulness to the end, living with faith, hope, and charity, pressing forward in faith, becoming as a little child

Salvation (S): eternal life, being found guiltless (or spotless) at the judgment, being numbered with the Lord's people, inheriting the kingdom of God, living in the future, or negatively, being damned, hewn down and cast into the fire

It must also be recognized that a large number of terms refer to combinations of these basic elements. Here are some examples:

Come unto me (F, R)

Look unto me (F, R, W)

Wash their garments in my blood (F, R, W, and H)

The gate by which you enter (R, W)

Getting into the straight and narrow path (R, W, E)

With these explanations in hand, we can now look at some of the clearer examples of brief meristic statements of this gospel—statements that may only include two or three of the six elements, but which are clearly not meant to exclude any of the others.

1 Nephi 13:40: ...all men must come unto him (R, W), or they cannot be saved (S).

1 Nephi 14:5: ...whoso repenteth not (\sim R) must perish (\sim S).

2 Nephi 2:9 ...they that believe in him (F) shall be saved (S).

2 Nephi 25:13 ...those who shall believe on his name (F) shall be saved in the kingdom of God (S).

3 Nephi 15:9: ..unto him that endureth to the end (E) will I give eternal life (S).

Listing Book of Mormon merisms.

We have identified over 795 statements in the Book of Mormon that could be interpreted as gospel merisms. Because many of these involve interpretations that could be controversial or less than obvious, this paper only offers more obvious examples grouped on three charts according to whether they include four, three, or only two gospel elements. These first three charts are selective in that they only include merisms which include eternal life/salvation as one of their elements.

<Insert Chart/Handout #1>

These seventeen passages clearly illustrate the pattern of gospel merisms identified in the three definitional chapters leaving little doubt but what the entire 6-part formula is implied in each one. The passages in the next group feature three gospel elements, but all appear to be teaching the same thing as the first group.

<Insert Chart/Handout #2>

Once we are familiar with these more comprehensive examples, we can now review the following chart listing the two-element merisms. Again, the evident similarity to the more comprehensive examples would confirm the view that they should be read as meristic statements intended to invoke the full six-element gospel formula.

<Insert Chart/Handout #3>

Chart #4 exhibits a randomized selection of the 795 merisms we have identified in the text. This will give the reader a better feel for the range of differences and similarities one can find. To assemble Chart #4, we simply took every fourth page of the Excel spreadsheet that lists all examples.

<Insert Chart/Handout #4>

Several of the merisms included here illustrate an interesting variation on the gospel formula in that the promise alluded to is a promised land or gathering of

Israel in this world rather than eternal life in the world to come. These biblical promises seem to serve as metaphors or surrogates for the eternal promises of the gospel message. While this will be an interesting topic for further research the point of including some reference to it here is to show that the gospel message itself provided Nephite prophets with a formula that they were able to adapt for other, though related, content. Of the 795 merisms included in this collection, a significant number are focused on a gathering or a promised land.

Gospel merisms and the New Testament

One of the greatest challenges facing New Testament scholars and teachers is the absence of a single clear and authoritative passage that would provide a comprehensive account of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is nothing that would provide the clear foundation for New Testament gospel teachers that 2 Nephi 31 provides for teachers of the Book of Mormon. Of course, Latter-day Saints see the same gospel being taught in both these volumes of scripture, so for them it may be of some interest to see whether Jesus may have used the same meristic approach in teaching his gospel in his Palestinian ministry as the Book of Mormon records in his teachings as recorded in 2 Nephi 31, 3 Nephi 11, and 3 Nephi 27.

Acts 2 offers the closest thing to a full statement of the six elements listed in the Book of Mormon version of the gospel of Christ. Here we have Peter,

speaking for the rest of the apostles, instructing “all that believed (F) (v. 44)” that they should “repent (R) and be baptized (W) . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins,” with the promise that they would then “receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (H) (v. 38).” After he further testified of many things and exhorted them to “save [them]selves (S) (v. 40),” we are then told that three thousand “gladly received his word (F, R)” and were baptized (W) and “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine (E) and fellowship (vs. 41–2).” With more aggressive interpretation, Hebrews 10 could be seen to list all six points. But in the gospels themselves, where Jesus is quoted directly, nothing comes close. And it is clear that neither of these passages employs merism to develop its theme. Both are focused on a problem at hand and pretend to no definitional purpose.

Conclusion

This paper develops and documents insights first mentioned in earlier articles. Three authoritative inclusions in the Book of Mormon define a consistently presented six-part formula that lists the basic elements of the gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ as taught in that text. These elements are used in various combinations in a meristic way throughout the volume and invoke the memory or understanding of the full formula in a variety of rhetorical contexts. Even though the language varies with the incorporation of various synonyms or combination

terms, the text appears to promote, from the beginning to the end, the doctrine that those who trust in Christ and repent of their sins can be baptized in water as a witness to God that they have made a covenant to obey his commandments and take his name upon them. When he judges their repentance to be sincere, he will send the remission of sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost, which in turn will help the convert to endure faithfully to the end—at which point they will be rewarded with eternal life.