

Further Light on Enallage

“Thou rememberest the twelve apostles of the Lamb? Behold they are they who shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, the twelve ministers of thy seed shall be judged of them; for ye are of the house of Israel.” (1 Nephi 12:9)

Recent experience suggests this brief addendum to my essay on *enallage* in the Book of Mormon.¹ As I have discussed in detail in that 1994 article, *enallage*, which is Greek for “interchange,” refers to a syntactic device that is fairly common in the Old Testament, where an author intentionally shifts from the singular to the plural (or vice versa) for rhetorical effect. In that article I show that while there are difficulties involved in demonstrating the presence of enallage in the Book of Mormon, a careful reading of contextual and verbal clues reveals that enallage does indeed appear to exist in some passages.

One evening, I happened to be reading Genesis 17,² when I became intrigued by what I found in verses 9 through 13:

[9] And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep [*w^eattāh . . . tjšmōr*] my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee [*’attāh w^ezar ’ākā ’āchāreykā*] in their generations. [10] This is my covenant, which ye shall keep [*tism^erž*], between me and you [*žbnkem*] and thy seed after thee [*zar’aka ’achareyka*]; Every man child among you [*lākem*] shall be circumcised. [11] And ye shall circumcise [*ūnemaltem*] the flesh of your foreskin [*’arlat^ekem*]; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you [*ūbēnēkem*]. [12] And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you [*lākem*], every man child in your generations [*l^edōrōt^ekem*], he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed [*mizzār ’ākā*]. [13] He that is born in thy house [*bēt^ekā*], and he that is bought with thy money [*kašp^ekā*], must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh [*bīsar^ekem*] for an everlasting covenant.

The distribution of the singular and plural forms in this passage is illustrated by the following table:

Verse	Singular Forms	Plural Forms
9	5	0
10	2	3
11	0	3
12	1	2
13	2	1

A trip to the library revealed that, while most commentators completely fail to mention this numerical variation, those who do mention it account for it in one of two ways. Some claim that the verses are in disarray, and that an earlier stratum of a more general nature has been swelled by a subsequent stratum of more explicit directives. Others, without actually using the term, see the numerical variation in these verses as an instance of enallage. Whether we see the passage as a unified composition or whether we see the priestly writer as incorporating into the passage a legal specification based on its “utterly impersonal legal style,”³ the meaning of the finished version should be clear to us today. Although God was speaking to Abraham alone, when he describes the requirements of his covenant he changes to a plural form of address, so as vividly and directly to address not only Abraham, but also his posterity, as if they were actually present.

I must have read this passage at least a dozen times in English in the past, but I never before noticed the numerical variation in the English pronouns between the singular *th*-forms (as in “*thou* shalt keep my covenant”) and the plural *y*-forms (as in “which *ye* shall keep”). Because in modern English *y*-forms have become invariable as to number, enallage is generally lost by modern English translations. Although it is discernible in the King James Version due to that version’s use of archaic pronouns, my experience has been that most people simply do not see it in English (due to either a lack of familiarity with archaic pronouns or the invariability of modern *y*-forms as mentioned above). I personally find enallage to be more easily discernible in Hebrew, partly because the pronominal suffixes and other forms that indicate number in Hebrew fairly obviously differ from one another, but mostly because reading in Hebrew forces me to concentrate on even the smallest textual details.

While working on my article concerning enallage, I was actively searching for examples (working mostly in English and merely spot-checking items in Hebrew for the sake of efficiency); this was the first time that I happened to stumble across a biblical example of enallage in the original language, and I must say that I found the effect quite striking. So much so, in fact, that I thought it likely that over the course of time there would have been scribal pressure to singularize some of the unexpected plural forms. A quick look at the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page confirmed my suspicion, as the Septuagint in verse 10 suggests “*thou* shalt keep” [tjšmōr] rather than the plural “*ye* shall keep” [tjšm^erû], so as to conform to the singular in verse 9.

The main thing I noticed about this passage was a pattern in verses 9 and 10 that particularly struck me because I had seen the same pattern in several verses of the Book of Mormon. In the first eight verses of Genesis 17, God is speaking to Abraham and establishing his covenant with him. The verbs in this section are for the most part first-person singulars (such as “I will make,” “have I made thee,” “I will make thee,” “I will establish my covenant,” “I will give unto thee,” and “I will be their God”). In verse 9, the subject of the verbs shifts from a first-person singular “I” (referring to God) to a second-person singular “thou” (referring to Abraham) in “*thou* shalt keep my covenant.” This shift is emphatic,⁴ both because the Hebrew actually uses the second-person singular pronoun *’attāh* (which is not necessary here, because the person and number of the subject are defined in the form of the verb itself), and because the pronoun is repeated a second time following the verb. God then refers to Abraham’s posterity in the third person, “and thy seed after thee in their generations.” At this point Abraham’s seed is associated with the verbal idea, but the verb is not repeated (if it had been, the form would have been third person). Finally, God addresses both Abraham and his seed together in the second-person plural: “which ye shall keep.” Thus the pattern is as follows:

1. A divine being or a prophet directly addresses an individual.
2. He addresses the individual in the second-person singular, “thou.”
3. He makes a third-person reference to that individual’s posterity, “thy seed.”
4. Finally, he directly addresses the individual and his posterity together in the second-person plural, “ye.”

In my original article I listed a number of possible Book of Mormon examples of enallage.⁵ As I studied this passage in Genesis 17, I realized that three of those Book of Mormon examples, 1 Nephi 12:9, 2 Nephi 1:31–32, and 2 Nephi 3:1–2, each follow this same pattern precisely. This may be illustrated by 1 Nephi 12:9:

And he said unto me: *Thou* rememberest the twelve apostles of the Lamb? Behold they are they who shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, the twelve ministers of *thy seed* shall be judged of them; for *ye* are of the house of Israel.

In this passage, an angel is addressing Nephi in vision. He addresses Nephi in the second-person singular, “thou”; he makes a third-person reference to Nephi’s posterity, “thy seed”; and then he directly addresses both Nephi and his posterity together in the second-person plural, “ye are of the house of Israel.”⁶

This pattern may be represented by the following formula: thou + thy seed = ye. On the strength of the parallel usage in Genesis 17:9–10, I would suggest that those three Book of Mormon passages should be upgraded from possible to probable examples of enallage, and that (1) in 1 Nephi 12:9 the word ye is a plural referring not just to Nephi, but to Nephi and his posterity; (2) in 2 Nephi 1:31–32, the word ye is a plural referring not just to Zoram, but to Zoram, Nephi, and their respective posterities; and (3) in 2 Nephi 3:1–2, the word ye is a plural referring not just to Joseph, but to Joseph, his brethren, and their respective posterities.

Research by Kevin L. Barney, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 6/2 (1997): 229–34.

Notes

1. See Kevin L. Barney, “Enallage in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 113–47.

2. My selection of Genesis 17 was not quite random. I had been researching Joseph Smith’s experience in learning Hebrew, and we know from his Ohio journal that Genesis 17 is one of the chapters the Prophet actually read in Hebrew. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:186.

3. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 264.

4. Such an emphasis is to be expected in covenantal language, which emphasizes the promises of the parties to each other. The sense may perhaps be captured by rendering “I, for my part” and “thou, for thy part.”

5. See Barney, “Enallage,” 142–43.

6. It is possible that the plural ye is meant to refer only to the twelve ministers, but logically the statement “ye are of the house of Israel” would apply not only to Nephi and the twelve ministers, but also to all Nephi’s descendants. The point of these verses seems to be that, because Nephi’s seed is of the house of Israel, his descendants shall be judged by the twelve apostles (directly, in the case of the twelve ministers, and indirectly, through the twelve ministers, in the case of the remainder of Nephi’s seed). Monte S. Nyman writes about this in “The Judgment Seat of Christ,” in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi through Moroni, from Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1995), 202–4.