

Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon

John W. Welch

It may seem strange to find a discussion of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon among a collection of essays concerning chiasmus in antiquity, since the Book of Mormon first appeared, in English, in 1830.¹ And in certain respects it is strange, or at least different. But in other respects, nothing could be more natural.

The Book of Mormon itself purports to be an ancient religious and partially secular record written by a group that left Jerusalem after the first Babylonian conquest of the city in 598/7 B.C. but before the capitulation of Jerusalem to Nebuchadrezzar II in 587/6 B.C.² Led by a prophetic individual named Lehi and his fourth son Nephi, the group travelled south on the Saudi Arabian frankincense trade routes³ and further by sea to the Western Hemisphere, where this culture survived until ca. 421 A.D. Some of these people remained conscious of their Near Eastern cultural heritage, and it was this segment of the population which was responsible for the writing and abridging of the texts now contained in the Book of Mormon.⁴ This people lived in an intense state of messianic expectation and recorded several revelations regarding the role of Christ and their spiritual relationship to him.

Ever since the Book of Mormon first appeared, however, it has aroused controversy and curiosity. Those who have believed in the validity of the book have asserted that it reads like an authentic Hebrew text and that its character and content are consistent with the Jewish and Near Eastern cultural background from which the book itself says that it derives.⁵ Those who have not been so credulous have responded that the book's style is „stilted, complicated, diffuse, meaningless or even brutal“⁶ and that any resemblance between the style of the Book of Mormon and ancient Hebrew literature is due to passages in the Book of Mormon which have been „plagiarized from the Bible.“⁷

My present purpose is not to put all such arguments or controversies to rest. Whether one accepts the antiquity of the Book of Mormon will tend to remain, to a significant extent, a matter of faith. Nevertheless, of all the things which can be said about the Book of Mormon, it must be acknowledged that the book, especially in its most literary portions, is replete with precise and extensive chiastic compositions. These passages are often meaningfully creative, original, and intricate, judged to be highly successful by any consistently applied criteria. The purpose of this essay is to display a few of the most salient chiastic arrangements in the Book of Mormon. However one views this book, no judgment concerning it can consider itself complete without at least taking into account the chiastic literary character of much of this writing. Several such passages will be discussed and then, in conclusion, the significance of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon will be briefly considered, first in respect to the Book of Mormon and then in light of what this may mean for chiastic analysis generally.

The first six books in the Book of Mormon, written from the Sixth to the Second Centuries B.C., have come down relatively intact and show little or no sign of redaction or alteration by later hands. The first two books, 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, were written by Nephi, the son of Lehi, although both books are composite works containing material either quoted from or reworked by Nephi from the writings of his father Lehi, his brother Jacob, and from certain portions of prophecies attributable to Isaiah⁸ which were known to Lehi and Nephi from records which they took with them from Jerusalem. Though composite, Nephi's writings are far from unorganized. His use of parallelism, balance, and particularly chiasmus is that of a sophisticated literary technician.

Nephi divided his writings into two books. The first book is predominantly an account of the migration of the group, and is written as a religio-political tract with a major purpose of establishing Nephi as the legitimate successor to his father as the leader of the colony. The second book contains almost exclusively spiritual and prophetic writings. Both books are independent chiasmic units, centrally focused and symmetrically organized, which itself explains why Nephi divided his writings into two books.

1 Nephi is a well-structured book, with almost every element in the first half of the book having a specific counterpart in the second half. The book begins and ends with prophetic statements about the impending fate of Jerusalem and the delivery of Lehi's group from this destruction. Lehi is the prophetic voice at first; Nephi has taken his place by the end. In between, the group's departure from the land of Jerusalem is paralleled by its arrival in the land of promise. Nephi establishes himself over his brothers by accomplishing two amazing feats: in the first half of the book he obtains sacred records where his brothers had failed, and in the second half he constructs a ship while his brothers said it could not be done. Many elements in the narration of these last two episodes are identical, down to the repetition of 1 Ne 3:7 at 17:3. In the central section of the book (chapters 8–15), two accounts are given of the same major vision, first as it was experienced by Lehi and second as it was duplicated in Nephi's experience (see 1 Ne 14:29). Interspersed amid this basic framework are further detailing doublets. A steel sword is important in chapter 4, while a steel bow is significant in chapter 16. The guiding words of the Lord are given to the people by means of two brass instruments, in the first half of the book by brass plates and in the second, by a brass ball. Nephi is bound with cords by his brothers twice, once in the desert in chapter 7, and again at sea in chapter 18. Lehi's wife Sariah is mentioned twice, once in chapter 5 and again in chapter 18. The father of Lehi's daughters-in-law, Ishmael, is mentioned prominently in exactly two sections, first in chapter 7 and again in chapter 16. At the very center, and much like the centerpiece of several Biblical books, stands Nephi's account of his encounter with the spirit of the Lord, as Nephi was „caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceeding high mountain" (1 Ne 11:1). Experiencing the same vision as his father Lehi appears, therefore, to be the decisive factor which in Nephi's mind ultimately established him as the successor to his father. It was clearly the most important spiritual experience of his life, and perhaps for this reason he places it at the center of his first book. The pattern of 1 Nephi may, therefore be displayed as follows:

A Lehi *prophesies* warnings of destruction to the Jews and foresees the mercy of God (Chapter 1) B Lehi's group *departs* from Jerusalem (2:2–15) C Nephi establishes himself over his brothers by obtaining the Plates of Brass (2:16–4:38) D The sword of fine steel (4:9) E Sariah's concern (5:1–9) F The Plates of Brass as a *guide* (5:10–6:6) G The sons of Lehi get the *daughters of Ishmael* and Ishmael joins the group (7:1–5, 22) H Nephi *bound with cords* in the wilderness (7:6–21) I Lehi's vision of the *Tree of Life* (8:1–38) J Lehi prophesies about the Old World and about the coming of the Lamb (10:1–22) K Nephi and the *Spirit of the Lord* (11:1–36) J' Nephi prophesies about the New World and the coming of the Lamb (12:1–14:30) I' Lehi's vision of the *Tree of Life* interpreted (15:1–36) G' The sons of Lehi marry the *daughters of Ishmael* and Ishmael dies (16:1–8, 34–35) F' The Brass Ball as a *guide* (16:9–17, 26–33) D' The bow of fine steel (16:18) C' Nephi establishes himself over his brothers by building a ship (17:1–18:4) (3:7//17:3) H' Nephi *bound with cords* on the ship (18:11–16, 20–21) E' Sariah's afflictions (18:17–19) B' Lehi's group *arrives* at the Promised Land (18:23–25) A' Nephi *prophesies* concerning the fate of the Jews and concerning the mercy of the Lord unto the afflicted (chapters 19–22)

In addition to utilizing chiasmus to confer a successful degree of coherence upon the structure of this overall narrative, Nephi also employs chiasmus on many other occasions on a smaller scale. Consider only a few. The main incident in the first half of the book is Nephi's obtaining the brass plates from a politically influential opponent of Lehi's named Laban. After the elder brothers had failed to obtain the plates by diplomacy or by purchase, Nephi

went into the city alone at night to steal the needed religious records. He tells his story in a noticeably chiastic manner: (A) First he leaves his brothers at the city walls, (B) then heads toward the house of Laban and finds Laban drunk on the street. (C) Nephi sees and describes Laban's steel sword, and (D) is constrained by the spirit to kill Laban. (E) The spirit affirms that Laban had been delivered into Nephi's hands. (F) Nephi recalls the imperative that his nation must not perish in unbelief and (G) particularly remembers the promise (cf. Lev 26:3 ff) that inasmuch as the nation obeys the law it shall prosper. (F') It therefore appears absolutely essential that the nation have the law to avoid perishing in unbelief, and thus (E') Nephi accepts that Laban had been delivered into his hands. Thus (D') he kills Laban and (C') takes his sword, armor and clothing, (B') proceeds to the house of Laban where he obtains the plates and (A') returns to his brothers outside the city walls (1 Ne 4:4–27). Immediately preceding this story, Nephi tells of his brothers' great fear of Laban (4:1–4), while at the end Nephi tells how his brothers fear Nephi, mistaking him at a distance for Laban (4:28–29). Although this narrative is a relatively straightforward episode, it is also apparent that the events could have been retold in a manner other than in the chiastic fashion in which it actually appears. Especially the central material which Nephi includes to justify the slaying did not need to be, and yet is very effectively, situated at the center of this pericope.

Likewise, the main incident in the second half of the book is Nephi's achieving preeminence over his brothers as they obtain passage to the land of promise. Here again, many chiastic features can be observed. When Nephi's brothers raise three objections against him in 1 Ne 17:17–22, namely that (A) he cannot accomplish so great a work, (B) that the group has been made to suffer unduly by Lehi and Nephi, and (C) that the group has been misled because they were willing to hearken unto Lehi who criticized the people of Jerusalem, Nephi answers these objections in 17:23–26 in the reverse order, namely (C') that people must hearken in order to be saved, (B') that the Israelites have historically suffered greatly, and (A') that the Lord has given men such as Moses the power to accomplish „great works“. Again, when Nephi tells of the voyage of the group, he does so in chiastic fashion, most deliberately, (and otherwise inexplicably) telling *twice* how his brothers were forced to loosen the bands with which they had bound him (18:15 and 18:20).

Beside utilizing chiasmus in structuring lengthy bodies of material, Nephi employs chiasmus in ordering individual words as well. In 1 Ne 17:36–40, for example, the following chiastic inversions appear:

A Behold, the Lord hath created the *earth* that it should be inhabited, And he hath created his *children* that they should possess it, B And he raiseth up a righteous *nation* And he destroyeth the *nations* of the wicked, B' And he *leadeth away* the righteous into precious lands And the wicked he *destroyeth* and curseth the land unto them. A' He ruleth high in the heavens for it is his throne and the *earth* is his footstool And he loveth *those* who will have him to be their God.

This passage is intricately constructed with direct and inverted parallelisms operating simultaneously on several levels. Besides the overall A–B–B'–A' framework, simple chiasms also appear with these lines augmenting their balanced composition without disrupting their basic parallelism. It is also interesting to note that chiastic elements such as these occur frequently in the writings of Nephi, but less so in the words preserved from Lehi and his fifth son Jacob.

The book of 2 Nephi, although not so detailed as 1 Nephi, is also a chiastic unit. Central emphasis is given here to the words of Isaiah, which are seen by both Jacob and Nephi as containing much which could be likened unto the future of Lehi's group. The book begins with Lehi's final Testaments to his sons, grandsons, and sons-in-law. It ends with Nephi's Testament to his nation (he appears to have had no sons). The organization of 2 Nephi is thus:

A The Testaments of Lehi; his death (Chs. 1–5) B Jacob’s Commentary on Isaiah 50–51 (Chs. 6–10)
C Isaiah 2–14 as „third witness” (Chs. 11–24) B’ Nephi’s Commentary on Isaiah 2–14 (Chs. 25–30) A’ The
Testament of Nephi (Chs. 31–33).

Consistent with the poetic character of much of the writing in this book, other chiasms in 2 Nephi are tightly constructed and relatively lyrical in character. In 2 Ne 28:21, Nephi composes these chiastic couplets describing the work of the devil:

a And others will he pacify And lull them *away* into carnal security b That they will say All is *well* in *Zion*
b’ Yea *Zion* prospers All is *well* a’ And thus he cheateth their souls And leadeth them *away* carefully down
to hell.

Similarly, a pleasing poetic use of chiasmus occurs in the following messianic hymn. The repetitions here seem to be consciously designed to convey emphatically Nephi’s understanding that salvation belongs not to the law as such, but to the Lord:

A 1 And notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the *law of Moses* 2 And look forward with
steadfastness unto *Christ* 3 Until the *law* shall be *fulfilled*, 4 For for this *end was the law given*. B Wherefore
the *law* hath become *dead unto us* And we are made *alive in Christ* because of our faith, Yet we keep the *law*
because of the commandments; C And we talk of Christ We rejoice in Christ, We preach of Christ, We
prophecy of Christ. C’ And we write according to our *prophecies* That our children may know To what
source they may look For a remission of their sins. B’ Wherefore we speak concerning the *law* That our
children may know the *deadness of the law* And may look forward to that *life* which is *in Christ*,
A’ 4 And know for what *end the law was given*, 3 And after that the *law* is *fulfilled* 2 *In Christ* that they
need not *harden* their hearts against him, 1 When the *law* had ought to be done away (2 Ne 25:24–27).

The next four books in the Book of Mormon (Jacob, Enos, Jarom and Omni) manifest virtually no chiasmus. These books are increasingly brief and, particularly the last two, were composed during a dark age in Nephite history which was marked by political stagnation and little or no literary activity. Nephite culture was finally revitalized by a king named Mosiah, who in the Second Century B.C. colonized an area north of the original Lehiite settlement. Mosiah’s son Benjamin, more than any other individual, typified this period of renaissance in the Nephite world.

One of the most interesting documents contained in the Book of Mormon is a copy of the speech delivered by Benjamin as he proclaimed his son, Mosiah II, king over his people, about 124 B.C. (Mos 2:9–5:15). Benjamin had apparently worked during his lifetime to preserve and perpetuate the understanding of ancient languages among his people, especially his sons (Mos 1:2–4). Thus it is most fitting that his last official address, which was apparently delivered during Rosh hashanna-Sukkoth⁹, and perhaps also in a Jubilee year,¹⁰ as well as in connection with the coronation of his son,¹¹ should epitomize a high classical style, being thoroughly chiastic.

Benjamin’s Speech is divided into several obvious sections by explicit breaks in the ceremony or transitions occurring at Mos 2:29–30, 3:1, 4:1–3, and 5:1–5. Further analysis suggests that the speech is a seven-part inverted system as follows:

I. Introduction (2:9–28) God as the Heavenly King and man’s obligations thereunder. God has physically created you. Covenant peoples are servants of God. The hope of exaltation after death. (A. Coronation proclamation. 2:29–30) II. For obedience to the laws the Lord and king impart victory and prosperity (cf.

Leviticus 26) (2:31–41) Prohibition of contention (2:32) III. The Angel's declaration of Christ's atoning mission for the salvation of mankind (3:2–10) IV. The present state of man and the point of his conversion (3:11–27) The possibility of reconciliation. The alternative of damnation. (B. The people fall to the ground, confess their iniquity, and are forgiven of their sins (4:1–3) III'. Benjamin's testimony of the goodness and glory of God and his salvation (4:4–12) II'. Stipulations of the law require men to impart substance for peace and social order (cf. Leviticus 25) (4:13–30) Prohibition of contention (4:14) (A. Covenant proclamation. 5:1–5) I'. Conclusion (5:6–15) God as Heavenly Father and excommunication upon breach of obligations. God has spiritually begotten you this day. Covenant people know God by serving him. The hope of exaltation of the people after death.

Most of the parallels in the organization of this speech are readily apparent. It is significant that the entire speech centers on a proclamation of the need for atonement/purification (Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, would also have fallen within days of the time when Benjamin delivered this speech). This central statement is constructed as an elaborate chiasm. Benjamin tells his nation that they will be lost unless:

(a) They *humble* themselves (b) and become as little *children* (c) believing that salvation is in the *atonement blood of Christ*; (d) for the *natural man* (e) is an enemy to God (f) and *has been* from the fall of Adam (f) and *will be* forever and ever (e) unless he yieldeth to the *Holy Spirit* (d) and putteth off the *natural man* (c) and becometh a saint through the *atonement of Christ* (b) and becometh as a *child* (a) submissive, meek and *humble* (Mos 3:18–19)

Chiastic repetitions occur frequently in Benjamin's rhetoric. Two further examples demonstrate the precision with which this was achieved. In the first section of his speech, Benjamin's ideas flow, seemingly without effort, through one sequence of thoughts and then again through the opposite order of that same series, with two unmistakably parallel decrees standing at the center of the system. Briefly stated,¹² the structure of this portion of the speech may be seen as follows:

A The Purpose of the Assembly is stated (2:9–10) „I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with words but that you should harken unto me and . . . that mysteries be unfolded to your view.” B What is man? We are all mortals (2:10–11) „I am a mortal man, like as yourselves . . . the Lord hath granted me all my strength.” C The Laws in Benjamin's Kingdom (2:12–14) „I have not sought riches . . . nor suffered that ye make slaves of one another, or murder, plunder, steal or commit adultery . . . nor that ye be laden with taxes.” D Service (2:15–17) „When ye are in the service of your fellow beings, ye are only in the service of your God.” E „Behold ye have *called* me your *king* (2:18) And if I, whom ye call your *king*, *Do* labor to *serve* you Then had not ye *ought* to labor to *serve* one another? And behold if I, whom ye *call* your *king* (2:19) Has spent his days in your *service* and yet hath been in the *service* of God, *Doth* merit any *thanks* from you O how had you *ought* to thank your heavenly King!” D' Service (2:20–21) „If ye should serve God with all your whole soul, yet would ye be unprofitable servants.” C' The Laws in God's Kingdom (2:22) „If you would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land.” B' What is man? We are of the dust (2:23–26) „He hath granted you life . . . I am no better than yourselves.” A' The Purpose of the Assembly amplified (2:27–28) „I have caused that ye should assemble yourselves that your blood should not come upon me.

It is particularly interesting to observe the masterful way in which each portion of the second half of this system enhances and completes the thought of its corresponding section in the first half of the section. In A, Benjamin draws attention to the purpose of the assembly from the people's perspective; in A', his thought is directed toward his own purpose for calling the assembly. In B, he declares himself, although the king, to be infirm like any other

mortal; in B', he emphatically states that all men are infirm, indeed less than the dust of the earth (2:25). In C, he reports the observance of the laws in his kingdom; in C', he explains the operation of the law in God's kingdom. In D, he teaches that one only serves God when one serves a fellowman, while in D' he makes the further penetrating point that no human service can be ultimately profitable to God, for no service (and all service is only service of God) is capable of removing the servant from his indebtedness to God. Finally in E, Benjamin transfers, as it were, any benefits he might receive under his royal rights and privileges to God, the heavenly King. It is clear that Benjamin's thought, in each instance, is not complete without its chiastic counterpart.

Also remarkably precise is the central passage in the seventh and final section of Benjamin's Speech. Immediately prior to this portion of the speech, Benjamin's people had reaffirmed to the king their willingness to keep the covenant and to be obedient to God's commandments in all things (Mos 5:5). At this point Benjamin pronounces his people „the children of Christ, his sons and daughters” (Mos 5:7) and issues a warning to all those who are unwilling to enter into or to keep sacred the covenant:

(a) And now whosoever shall not take upon them the *name of Christ* (b) must be *called* by some other name; (c) therefore he findeth himself on the *left hand of God*. (d) And I would that ye should *remember* that this is the name (e) that should never be *blotted out* (f) except it be through *transgression*; therefore (f) take heed that ye do not *transgress* (e) that the name be not *blotted out* of your hearts (d) I would that ye should *remember* to retain this name (c) that ye are not found on the *left hand of God*, (b) but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be *called* (a) and also the *name* by which he shall call you (Mos. 5:10–12).

Again, the repetition here is precise, extensive and meaningful. It simply strains reason to imagine that such structure in this oration occurred accidentally. Furthermore, the historical setting and classical interests of Benjamin make it all the more plausible to view this speech as one of the great chiastic writings of all time.

Benjamin's speech is the first major section in the Book of Mosiah. This book covers events from approximately 150 B.C. to 92 B.C., with the earliest material coming at the center of the book. Although it appears that this book was edited, in certain parts, by Mormon in the Fourth Century A.D., it seems to have retained its organizational framework, which is fundamentally chiastic. The book begins with Benjamin's Speech, in which his son Mosiah is crowned king and the people exhorted to righteousness; it ends with Mosiah's edict in which Judges are selected to succeed Mosiah in power. Benjamin consecrates priests in the first half of the book; Alma ordains priests and teachers in the second half. The travels of Ammon to the land of Lehi-Nephi, where Ammon finds the people of Zeniff in bondage to harsh overlords, is paralleled by the subsequent escape of Alma from bondage out of the same land. A set of 24 Gold Plates are conspicuously mentioned in both halves of the book, once in chapter 8 and again in chapter 21. Finally, at the center stands the powerful declarations of a repentance-crying prophet named Abinadi, who is persecuted and interrogated and put to death. Abinadi's recitation of the law and his commentary on Isaiah 52:7–10 and 53:1–12 constitute an apt centerpiece for this book, whose unifying theme is to show that those who reject the word of God will be brought into bondage and destroyed, whereas those who obey divine injunctions, especially as taught by the anointed Nephite rulers, will prosper in the land.¹³

The next book in the Book of Mormon is entitled the Book of Alma. It contains 63 chapters and is the most diverse composition in the entire volume. The last 18 chapters were written by Helaman, the son of Alma, during a period of intense civil strife; the earlier chapters contain a wide array of records concerning the words and deeds of Alma and several of his contemporaries. Many of the speeches and hymns composed by Alma show chiastic tendencies, especially those things which he wrote late in his life.¹⁴ For example, as a young man, Alma had experienced a

powerful conversion, which in his youth he had described in relatively abrupt antithetical parallel statements, including:

„I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the marvelous light of God.

My soul was racked with eternal torment; but I am snatched, and my soul is pained no more.” (Mos. 27:29)

As an old man, blessing his first-born son Helaman, Alma relives his conversion, but now he retells and reshapes it within a meticulous chiasmic framework which not only contrasts the intense agony of his conversion with its exuberant joy but also frames that conversion with twelve precisely flanking elements which surround the focal point of that conversion, namely Alma’s reliance on „one Jesus Christ, a Son of God.” This extraordinary chapter, Alma 36, follows a rigorous chiasmic pattern:

My son give ear to my words (1) Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (1) Do as I have done (2) Captivity of our fathers -- bondage (2) He surely did deliver them (2) Trust in God (3) Support in trials, troubles and afflictions (3) I know this not of myself but of God (4) Born of God (5) Alma seeks to harm the Church (6) Limbs paralyzed (10) Fear of the presence of God (14) Pains of a damned soul (16) Alma remembers one Jesus Christ (17) Alma calls upon Jesus Christ (18) Soul filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain (20) Long to be in presence of God (22) Use of limbs returns (23) Alma labors to strengthen the souls of men (24) Born of God (26) Therefore my knowledge is of God (26) Supported under trials and troubles and afflictions (27) Trust in him (27) He will deliver me (27) Egypt -- captivity (28–29) Know as I do know (30) Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (30) This according to his word (30)

It is difficult to imagine a more paradigmatic or a more effective use of chiasmus than this. Alma 36 is worthy in form to the best of any ancient chiasmic writer. Two further points deserve particular attention: first, as if to remove any doubt concerning the fact that this chiasmic arrangement was intended to accentuate the contrast between the agony and the joy which Alma had experienced, he makes that contrast explicit in verse 20 when he states: „My soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain.” Second, it says much for Alma’s artistic sensitivities that he succeeds in placing the turning point of his life at the turning point of this chapter. Such effects, it would appear, do not occur without design. As natural as it might seem to use chiasmus as a literary device in contrasting opposites such as those Alma had experienced or in emphasizing the turning point of one’s conversion, its usage is not at all obvious or automatic, as is evidenced by the fact that Alma did not use it when he described his conversion as a young man. Such a use of chiasmus is, rather, a conscious creation of an imaginative and mature artist.

Alma’s literary skill rises to a further level of creativity in the most unique chiasmic passage he appears to have written, Alma 41:13–15. From Alma 36 we have already seen that Alma is capable of flexibility and fluency within chiasmic principles. In Alma 41, he adds a sense of innovation to those qualities. While expounding the principle of restoration (or divine judgment), Alma lists four pairs of adjectival substantives (w_1 – w_2 to z_1 – z_2), and then turns around to pair two lists of four terms and to reverse their order at the same time (z_2 to w_2 , and z_1 to w_1). The effect is clever:

Alma 41:13–15 A My son, the meaning of the word *restoration* is to bring back B Evil for evil Carnal for carnal Devilish for devilish-- $C_{1\&2}$ w_1 w_2 *good* for that which is *good*, x_1 x_2 *righteous* for that which is *righteous* y_1 y_2 *just* for that which is *just* z_1 z_2 *merciful* for that which is *merciful*; Therefore

my son see that thou art C₂ z₂ *merciful* unto your brethren, y₂ deal *justly*, x₂ judge *righteously* w₂ and do *good* continually; And if ye do all these things, Ye shall have your reward, yea, C₁ z₁ ye shall have *mercy* restored unto you again, y₁ ye shall have *justice* restored unto you again, x₁ ye shall have a *righteous* judgement restored unto you again, w₁ and ye shall have *good* rewarded unto you again. B' For that which ye do send out Shall return unto you again And be restored; A' Therefore the *word restoration* more fully condemneth the sinner and justifieth him not at all.

The pair of lists in the second half of this chiasm has much in common with the list of pairs in the first half. Each of the pairs in the first half is composed, on the one hand, of a substantive and, on the other hand, of a predicate adjective (e.g. „just things” will be rewarded for that which *is* „just”). It is significant that of the two lists contained in the second half of this system, the first list is a list of predicate adjectives (e.g. see that you *are* just), while the second list is a list of substantives (e.g. ye shall have *justice*). This inversion operates concurrently with the inversion in the order of the lists both times they appear in the second half of the passage. Altogether this is an unusual but extremely successful occurrence of chiasmus.

Compared to the high chiastic style used by writers such as Benjamin and Alma during the flowering of Nephite culture during the late Second and early First Centuries B.C., the literary achievement of subsequent Book of Mormon authors pales noticeably. Helaman and his successor, who was another writer named Nephi, along with Mormon and Moroni are the major contributors to the last third of the book. None of them appears to employ a wide variety of literary devices, let alone chiasmus. A case might be made that the books of Helaman, 3 Nephi and Ether are centrally weighted or roughly chiastic, but aside from occasional, limited usages, the occurrence of chiasmus in the last sections of the Book of Mormon diminishes significantly. Whether this is attributable to the immediate economic and political pressures which the Nephite nation increasingly experienced until its destruction in the Fourth Century A.D., or whether this is simply due to the fact that the First Century Nephite renaissance had run its course, or again merely because the later portions of the Book of Mormon are the most heavily abridged and redacted cannot be said. But whatever the reason the contrast between the last third of the Book of Mormon and its earlier sections is rather marked, which in and of itself is rather remarkable, given that Joseph Smith’s influence as translator is a constant factor throughout.

No one seriously contends that Joseph Smith or anyone associated with him knew or could have known of chiasmus or had the training to discover this principle for himself. The evidence is overwhelming against such a claim. And even if he had known in theory of chiasmus, there would still have remained the formidable task of composing the well-balanced, meaningful chiastic structures (combined with other structures unknown or unanalyzed in his time) which are found in precisely those portions of the Book of Mormon in which one would logically and historically expect to find them. Accomplishing all of this would have been an especially imposing task, since the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith’s first work, which, at age 24, he dictated without notes mostly inside of six months and rarely revised the only draft which the manuscript ever saw.

Several independent conclusions may therefore be drawn from the foregoing discussion. If, on the one hand, one should view Smith himself as being responsible for the book, this would initially imply that even extremely complex chiastic patterns have occurred here completely unintentionally and accidentally. Perhaps such chiastic incidences should then be explained as a product of something such as a general human literary sense of balance or symmetry. This, of course, would have broad implications with respect to one’s understanding of the many chiastic passages observed elsewhere in the Bible and in other ancient writings. It would not, however, explain why chiasmus is not, then, more universally observable and why it seems to occur in certain periods of a culture’s literary development but not in others. If, on the other hand, one views the Book of Mormon alongside other

ancient texts, it would appear that chiasmus should be viewed as an even more durable literary figure than one might otherwise have expected. At least the Book of Mormon offers evidence that chiasmus was preserved and utilized with unusual conscientiousness as a basic element of this culture's literary heritage over long periods of time. How such a literary preference or sensitivity was taught and transmitted, of course, remains unknown. These and many other questions of general interest raised by the presence of chiasmus in the texts of the Book of Mormon persist regardless of how one views the book as a matter of faith.

Finally, and perhaps above all else, the study of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon shows how badly misunderstood a writing can be if it is not examined carefully. This lesson, too, applies regardless of what one's opinion is of the Book of Mormon, or for that matter, whatever book one may be examining. Although any book may be misread, the Book of Mormon has probably suffered more than its fair share of misunderstanding. Indeed it has even been observed that the book „has not been universally considered as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion on it.”¹⁵ To understand this book, however, it surely must be read, and not just superficially, but with sufficient effort to perceive its message and to sense its content. As with much of ancient literature, the design and depth of the Book of Mormon often comes to light only when the book is studied with chiasmic principles in mind.

FOOTNOTES

1 The Book of Mormon was published in 1830 (Palmyra, N.Y.: E.B. Grandin) by Joseph Smith, Jr., the first modern prophet of the church which has since become widely known as the Mormon Church, properly called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormon Church accepts the Book of Mormon as an ancient scriptural record comparable in many respects to the biblical, apocryphal or pseudepigraphic writings of the ancient Jews. Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon from a set of gold tablets presumably compiled and abridged by a man named Mormon in the Fourth Century A.D. References herein are to the chapters and verses of the 1879 and later LDS editions of the book.

2 See generally this author's comments in „They Came from Jerusalem -- Some Old World Perspectives on the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* 6:26 (Sept. 1976).

3 See L.M. and H.A. Hilton, „In Search of Lehi's Trail,” *Ensign* 6:32 (Sept.-Oct. 1976). See also H. W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), pp. 36 ff.

4 H. W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1967), pp. 209 ff.

5 P. P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1920), p. 105; H. W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, ch. 21.

6 Bruce Kinney, *Mormonism, the Islam of America* (New York: F.H. Revell Co., 1912), p. 60.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Lehi appears to have known Is 2-14, 29, 40:3, 48-53 and 55:1-2.

9 The people bring sacrificial animals (Mos 2:3) and dwell in booths to hear the address delivered from the temple (Mos 2:6). Many other features indicate that the setting of this speech is proximate to a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. See J. Tvedtnes, „A Nephite Feast of Tabernacles,” unpub. (1975); cf. J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2d ed., p. 164.

10 Two sections of Benjamin’s speech are closely related to Lev. 25–26 concerning Jubilee, but no specific mention of Jubilee is made by Benjamin.

11 Concerning the coronation ritual here, see H.W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City; Deseret, 1964), ch. 23.

12 A detailed analysis of this passage, Mos 2:9–28, may be found in my thesis, „A Study Relating Chiasmus in the *Book of Mormon* to Chiasmus in the *Old Testament*, Ugaritic Epics, Homer, and Selected Greek and Latin Authors,” pp. 140–47.

13 A detailed outline for the Book of Mosiah is suggested in my article in *BYUS* 10:82.

14 For example, Alma 36, 29, 12–13.

15 Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 26.