

Finding Connections through Parsing

[Consult the original publication for formatting of examples given in this chapter.]

We often think we understand a passage of scripture, but our understanding may sometimes be only an intuitive response to the words on the page. While an intuitive response can often be helpful, further study can help us understand the scripture even better. Problems of vocabulary can be alleviated by attention to dictionaries and wordbooks, but problems of grammar are a little more difficult to solve. One way to overcome grammatical problems is to parse—in other words, diagram—the passages so that you can see how the parts of the sentences relate to each other. Translators often use parsing to help them understand how the sentences they are translating work. That allows them, as much as possible, to duplicate the work done by the original sentence. Parsing is also useful to those of us who are not translating scripture, because after all, we need the same depth of understanding as the translator needs in order to best understand the passages we read.

The idea of parsing sentences frightens many. It calls up visions of defining gerunds and participial phrases. It makes us worry that we will not know whether the line we are supposed to draw when we diagram the sentence goes down to the right or down to the left. It causes us to fear a bad grade.

The truth of the matter is that parsing need not be particularly difficult. It does not require knowing the names of the parts of a sentence. The point of parsing, after all, is not to show our mastery of the technical vocabulary of grammar but to show how the parts of the sentences we are interested in relate to each other. Since we already speak English with at least a modicum of facility, that should not be a problem. It may also be important to remember that we are not graded for this kind of study. No one is going to check our parsing to see if we got it right. We got it right if it helps us understand the verses we are studying.

Parsing helps us find two basic elements of concern to us: subordination and parallelism. Subordinate words and phrases are literally those whose meaning or function is controlled by the meaning or function of another word or phrase. For grammarians, they are lexical units that function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. Parallel words and phrases function in the same way as each other. (This discussion of grammatical technicalities is easily understood through example.)

A sentence diagram shows the basic units of a sentence or passage by putting each significant part of the sentence on its own line and arranging the various lines to display the relations between the parts. We could parse a sentence to show the relation of every word in the sentence to every other word, or we could relate larger pieces of the sentence. There is no such thing as the right level of parsing. If we are parsing a longer passage, we may want to parse at the sentence level, showing by our diagram how the sentences of the passage are related to each other. We could also parse at larger levels; an outline is a kind of parsing (see the section called “Outlining”). Usually I prefer to parse at the phrase or clause level. Though I do not know that it would be useful to parse at the word level, it may be helpful for some. A traditional diagram of a sentence parses at the word level.

Following are some guidelines for producing a parsed sentence, but that is all they are—guidelines. If I see a relation in a sentence that I think is important, I use my diagram to show that relation, even if these rules do not provide a way to do so.

1. Before parsing the sentence, be sure to know the subject and verb of the sentence. That is not always as easy as it sounds, but identifying them will help us see much more clearly what the sentence is about.

2. Begin the parsing of any new sentence at the left margin of the page, unless the sentence is tightly bound to some network of subordination or parallelism in previous sentences and beginning at the left will cause that network to be overlooked.

3. Think about each verb or verbal clause in the sentence. They will usually suggest good places to make a break. In general, let each verb have its own line. For example, in Mosiah 4:11 we see this clause: "if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins." I might break it into these pieces:

if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins

4. Position the phrase containing the verb beneath the previous element of the sentence to show a particular relation:

if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your
sins

This is how I indicate that the three phrases are parallel.

5. Use devices such as lines or square brackets to show connections that we might otherwise overlook. For example, suppose we have parsed part of Mosiah 4:11 in this way:

as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have
tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such
exceed- ingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember

Such a diagram shows much of the structure, but we may notice even more by adding some lines to clarify how these elements are related:

as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and
have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which
causeth such exceed- ingly great joy in your souls, even
so I would that ye should remember . . .

The vertical lines indicate that the first two lines are parallel to each other and to the last line. The second line shows the connection of the three verbs in the clause that begins "if ye have known."

6. Most of all, do not get too nervous about this. Remember why we are doing it: to help us understand the passage we are looking at. It may be a little difficult at first, but with practice it becomes easier.

Following is a parsing of Mosiah 4:11 as a whole. Notice that I have not only used lines to draw connections between things that we might otherwise overlook, I have also put the phrases I take to be parenthetical in square brackets and the verbs I want to focus on in boldface. Some people add color to mark features to which they want to draw attention. However it is done, parsing helps us better understand the scriptures.

Mosiah 4:11

And again I **say** unto you [as I have said before], that as ye **have come** to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye **have known** of his goodness and **have tasted** of his love, and **have received** a remission of your sins, [which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls], even so I would that ye should **remember**, [and always retain in remembrance], the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, [unworthy creatures], and **humble** yourselves [even in the depths of humility], calling on the name of the Lord daily, and **standing** steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel.