

Rhetoric

In ordinary usage, the word *rhetoric* often has negative connotations. For example, we speak of empty rhetoric and mere rhetoric, and we insult someone if we speak of what they say as rhetoric. It is no compliment to say that a politician uses rhetoric. However, in spite of such connotations, the word has a positive meaning as well. Rhetoric is indispensable; it relates words and ideas to each other and helps us create more ideas. We are all familiar with logic and grammar, two other ways of relating words and ideas to each other. Grammar relates words to each other to form meaningful phrases and sentences. Logic connects the ideas of sentences to each other to form arguments and to allow us to evaluate how various ideas relate to each other. In addition to the grammatical and logical relations of words, sentences, and ideas, there are rhetorical relations. These rhetorical relations are various patterns of words and ideas that we use to create a variety of effects. For example, repeating the same word at the beginning and end of a sentence is using the rhetorical pattern called anadiplosis.

Since the first work of John W. Welch on chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,¹ many Latter-day Saints have learned about rhetoric, particularly the rhetorical form (or figure) called chiasmus. Chiasmus is only one of many rhetorical forms that inform language, including scriptural language. Those familiar with chiasmus know that it can call our attention to a part of scripture that we might otherwise overlook. Sometimes, for example, a chiastic pattern can help us see the focal point of a chiastically structured passage of scripture. Other rhetorical patterns create other sorts of emphases.

We speak grammatically without instruction, but a grammar class can help us better understand how grammar affects meaning. Almost everyone thinks, speaks, and writes logically most of the time, but logic classes help us evaluate our thinking better. Similarly, we use rhetoric all the time, but explicit instruction about rhetoric can help us understand more about what we hear and read.

A number of handbooks discuss rhetoric, and many are explicitly for those interested in scripture reading. In my opinion, one of the best—it is reasonably complete, carefully written, and oriented to an LDS audience—was written by Camille Williams. It is called *Rhetoric Workbook*.² The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) has also published a Book of Mormon with a variety of rhetorical figures noted and formatted by Donald W. Parry.³

The rhetorical patterns in a scripture can often indicate what the writer is doing. For example, in Romans 1:5 Paul speaks of receiving “grace and apostleship” from Jesus Christ. That may be what is called a pleonastic pair, which is two nouns connected by *and* to express one idea. Genesis 1:2, for example, says that earth was “without form, and void.” Rather than saying the earth was “not only without form, it was also void,” this phrase may say something like this: “without form; in other words, void.”

Sometimes a pleonastic pair indicates a modifying relationship between two words. For example, Genesis 3:16 includes the phrase “thy sorrow and thy conception.” This seems to be a pleonastic pair and could also be translated “the sorrow of thy conception.” Thus we can ask ourselves whether the pair of words “grace and apostleship” is a pleonastic pair. If so, Paul may be identifying God’s grace with his own call to the apostleship, or he may be saying “the grace of apostleship.” Remember, however, that our interest in whether Paul is using a pleonastic pair in Romans 1:5 is really an interest in understanding what he says.

There are many rhetorical figures, and each has several possible effects. It is not possible to include a detailed discussion of all the rhetorical figures here, but Williams's book as well as Parry's can help us begin to see how to approach rhetoric in the scriptures. Following are a few commonly mentioned rhetorical figures and a scriptural example of each:⁴

Chiasmus. The repetition of ideas in inverted order (a-b-b-a):

A He *trusted* on the Lord B that he would *deliver* him: B let him *deliver* him, A seeing he *delighted* in him.
(Psalm 22:8)

The ideas are similar, though the language may not be similar.

Antimetabole. The repetition of words in the order a-b-b-a. It is a form of readily identifiable chiasmus, as in the repetition of *eateth* and *eateth not* in Romans 14:3:

A Let not him that *eateth* B despise him that *eateth not*; B and let not him which *eateth not* A judge him that *eateth*.

Parallelism. The repetition of similar ideas in different though semantically parallel phrasing. Usually found on the clause level. Note the following parallelism from Doctrine and Covenants 4:7:

Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Polyptoton. The use of two or more words that have the same root but different affixes or slight variations. Romans 9:21 (*honour* and *dishonour*) is an example of polyptoton:

Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto *honour*, and another unto *dishonour*?

Epanalepsis. Unpatterned repetition of a word, phrase, or clause. The repetition of *see* and *hear* in Ezekiel 12:2 are examples:

Which have eyes to *see*, and *see not*; they have ears to *hear*, and *hear not*.

Anaphora. The repetition of a word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses. The repetition of *not in* in Romans 13:13 is anaphora:

Let us walk honestly, as in the day; *not in* rioting and drunkenness, *not in* chambering and wantonness, *not in* strife and envying.

Epistrophe. The repetition of a word or words at the end of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses. The last two uses of *unclean* in Romans 14:14 is epistrophe:

I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be *unclean*, to him it is *unclean*.

Anadiplosis. The final word or phrase of a clause repeated at the beginning of the next clause, as in Romans 6:10:

For in that *he died, he died* unto sin once: but in that *he liveth, he liveth* unto God.

Climax. A series of phrases or clauses (frequently in parallel syntax) joined by anadiplosis or near anadiplosis, as in Romans 5:3–5:

And not only so, but we glory in *tribulations* also: knowing that *tribulation* worketh *patience*; And *patience, experience*; and *experience, hope*: And *hope* maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

Epanadiplosis. A word or words repeated at the beginning and end of a phrase, clause, sentence, or verse—as in Romans 13:7:

Render therefore to all their dues: *tribute* to whom *tribute* is due; *custom* to whom *custom*; *fear* to whom *fear*; *honour* to whom *honour*.

Antithesis. The conjoining of two pairs of contrasting elements in parallel syntax or near parallel syntax, as in Romans 9:13, for example:

Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.

Interrogation. A series of questions, either to oneself or someone else, as in Job 6:12–13:

Is my strength the strength of stones? or is my flesh of brass? Is not my help in me? and is wisdom driven quite from me?

Notes

1. See John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10 (autumn 1969): 69–84.
2. Camille Williams’s *Rhetoric Workbook* is unpublished. Copies can be obtained by contacting Camille Williams c/o James E. Faulconer, Philosophy Department, 3196 Jesse Knight Humanities Building, BYU, Provo, Utah 84602.
3. See Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992).
4. See Williams, *Rhetoric Workbook*.