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Title

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A tradition in Book of Mormon literary study has crystalized over the past twenty years or so. This tradition has three discernable directions. Perhaps the most familiar of these is the attempt to identify structures and forms in the book that are found in ancient documents, particularly the Hebrew Bible and other Near Eastern documents, such as poetic parallelism (i.e., the collocation of semantically, syntactically, or grammatically similar phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) and chiasmus (inverse parallelism, such as the pattern a b c / c b a). Another familiar course is "wordprint" analysis by which scholars attempt to determine if a work derives from one or many authors. While these two approaches seek to elucidate the meaning of the text, they (and particularly the second) have often had the historical goal of seeking to demonstrate the antiquity of the book. A third, less familiar direction is the application of modern literary-critical methods to elucidate and discuss the book. This approach has generally not had the historical aim the other two approaches have had.

The book under review here has been influenced by all three of these directions, but is mainly in line with the first. The book chiefly consists of displaying the parallelistic or repetitive structure of the entire Book of Mormon. Apart from the author's extremely short "Introduction" and "A Note of Explanation" (pp. iii-vii) and his wife's "Foreword" (p. i), which all provide the rationale for the work and its theological and historical perspectives, the entire book is a reproduction of the Book of Mormon with phrases, sentences, and paragraphs indented and spaced in order to exhibit the book's perceived parallelistic structure (pp. viii-988). The only other materials coming from the author are comments and footnotes, mostly on the first one hundred pages, which make a few observations regarding specific passages or forms in the first part of the Book of Mormon, present definitions of literary terms and structures, and offer theological and inspirational miscellanea.

By its own admission, the book is not a scholarly work but rather a witness of the author's religious convictions. Indeed, it was his family for whom the work was originally
written as a “as a gift of his testimony of the language of the Book of Mormon” (p. i) that had the work published. This may account for the extremely brief and undeveloped character of the author’s arguments and analysis. If there is a main argument in the introductory material and notes, it is that the literary form of the Book of Mormon is evidence of the book’s divine character. While the author notes that real proof of the book’s character comes through a spiritual witness, the concentration and perfection of repetitive structures throughout the book show for him that the form, and hence the text, has a divine origin. Moreover, the “refined and pure phrasing” in the Book of Mormon which is not found in other books, the author argues, gives meaning to Joseph Smith’s statement that “the Book of Mormon is the most correct of any book on earth” (p. iv). One of the author’s specific historical arguments is that “parallelism is not original with the Hebrews nor is it a product of language evolution” since parallelistic form is found not only in parts of the Book of Mormon which by traditional dating and interpretation stem from ancient Israel but in the speeches of “the pre-mortal Messiah and his prophets... long before the house of Israel came into being” (p. v). In other words, this style is not of human origin; it is divine.

The point of this review is not to question Brown’s religious views, nor will it dwell on his metaphysical-historical judgments about the origin of the parallelistic form of the Book of Mormon which certainly can be questioned, even by scholars who view the book from an orthodox perspective. The point is rather to show that his layout of the text—apart from the problematic secondary material he has added—is a helpful contribution to the literary study of the Book of Mormon and has implications for further study.

That the Book of Mormon has a style which involves parallelism and repetition is not Brown’s imposition upon the text. And he does not go too far in trying to see these structures throughout the entire book. They are really there. Before becoming acquainted with Brown’s book, I began my own study of Book of Mormon narrative. Part of this work involved ascertaining in detail the rhetorical or literary structure of certain chapters in the book. All the chapters studied displayed structures of repetition or other definable structures (see below). This is not to say the Book of Mormon is somehow unique in having discernable literary forms. Every product of speech—be it literary, religious, scientific, journalistic, or whatever—has a
formal logic and stylistic features. Form is inherent in the conventions of speech and is begotten the minute we open our mouths or pick up the pen. But this investigation showed that the Book of Mormon had its own concentrated and intelligent style that required description. When Brown’s book appeared, I was happy to see that someone had attempted to perform this analysis for the entire Book of Mormon.

Certainly there are problems with Brown’s textual presentation and his secondary observations. Brown is too simplistic in calling all his discerned structures examples of parallelism. It seems in several cases that his search for repetition may have obscured the representation of other forms. Furthermore, his work, though covering the entire Book of Mormon, has no real analysis or commentary. For example, a reader would like to see some discussion about how form affects the meaning of passages or a much more mature and extensive discussion about the historical significance of the forms. In connection with the lack of analysis, while Brown does refer to some studies of literary matters in the Hebrew Bible for elucidation of points here and there, he has not digested this material but uses it in a piecemeal fashion. Another difficulty lies in the Book of Mormon text he has used. Literary analysis should be conducted on the best text available, which, arguably, is the text that Joseph Smith first dictated. The Original Manuscript would for the most part represent this text (theoretically it may not completely represent what Joseph Smith dictated since there is a chance that scribes did not correctly write what he said). But since it is not available for general public use and is incomplete, constituting an “original” text can only be done by making conjectures from the Original Manuscript in connection with the Printer’s Manuscript (copied by Oliver Cowdery from the Original) and early published editions of the Book of Mormon. Brown has apparently attempted to give his readers something of an original text, but it is not trustworthy. His sources for his text seem to be the first edition (1830) and the Printer’s Manuscript, which he calls “the earliest documents available” (p. 125; cf. pp. 260, 540). It appears that he has eclectically chosen readings from these sources, but he has not always included clearly authentic readings from these early documents.

These shortcomings limit the value of Brown’s textual representation. Nevertheless, it is still beneficial as a springboard for more detailed consideration of form and style.
It draws our attention to literary features that require further investigation and discussion. A few examples will show the type of features and issues Brown’s work brings into view. The first three derive from my own study of Alma 30 conducted prior to my seeing Brown’s book. The structuring of the text, however, is much the same as in Brown’s work. The fourth and last example is dependent on Brown’s work, though with this I use my own, slightly different, structuring. This selection of examples will not only show how Brown’s work might stimulate thinking about the issues; it will also exemplify the diversity of Book of Mormon forms and will show how we can go beyond mere structuring of the text to say something about its meaning.

1. One of the Book of Mormon’s formal characteristics is embedding, where each phrase in a series of phrases is grammatically or logically dependent upon the phrase just before it, thus forming a chain of linked phrases. For example, in Alma’s description of Korihor’s curse (Alma 30:47) we find a five-member embedded structure:

   a) Therefore, if thou shalt deny again,
   b) behold, God shall smite thee,
   c) that thou shalt become dumb,
   d) that thou shalt never open thy mouth any more,
   e) that thou shalt not deceive this people any more.

   The first two phrases are members of a conditional (“if-then”) phrase. Phrase c develops b with a result clause conjoined with the word “that” describing the effect of the smiting; phrase d develops c, also with a result clause similarly conjoined, describing or defining the effect of being dumb; and finally e concludes with another similar result clause describing what happens when one cannot open one’s mouth. One of the literary effects of this particular embedded structure is a feeling of focusing. From the general condition of denial one moves to the specific result of being smitten. This is then defined further as becoming dumb. Temporal limits are then set for the curse: Korihor will never open his mouth any more. The final clause fleshes out the description by giving the ultimate rationale for the curse.

2. Another feature of Book of Mormon narrative is listing. This may be termed a type of parallelism. Korihor describes the
means by which the church leaders have oppressed the people (Alma 30:28):

and have brought them to believe
by their traditions,
and their dreams,
and their whims,
and their visions,
and their pretended mysteries

The repetitive structure is clear whether one sees it visually listed as here or reads it in customary verse-paragraph form. One of the effects of this list is to halt the reader in the middle of Korihor’s criticism and hear more emphatically the anti-Christ’s criticisms. They become drum beats accentuating his charges. The reader becomes more aware of his negative character hearing plainly his sacrilegious mixing of the pure forms of religious knowledge, i.e., traditions, dreams, and visions, with impure forms, i.e., whims and pretended mysteries.

3. The last example from Alma 30 shows the statement-counterstatement form (30:24-26).

a  Ye say that this people is a free people,

b  behold, I say these are in bondage

c  Ye say that those ancient prophecies are true,

d  behold, I say that ye do not know that they are true

e  Ye say that this people is a guilty and a fallen people

f  because of the transgression of a parent,

g  behold, I say that a child is not guilty because of its parents.

h  And ye also say that Christ shall come,

i  but, behold, I say that ye do not know that there shall be a Christ.

j  And ye say also that he shall be slain for the sins of the world—

Korihor first makes a statement about what the people believe (a, c, e, h) and then refutes it (b, d, g, i). The last item in the series contains only a statement (j) with no refutation, but this is intuited by the momentum of the passage. The third statement contains an extra explanatory tag (f) not found in the other cases. Each statement contains the initial elements “ye ... say that.” The counterstatements begin with “behold, I say that.” This form, much like the list in the previous example, sets up a rhythmic expectation. Its tempo is much slower than the list’s, but it draws the reader’s attention to its message just as
well. This form which sets ideas off against one another is particularly apt as a miniature reflection of the larger political and religious conflict between Korihor and Alma.

4. In scanning Brown’s text of the Book of Mormon, I picked several passages at random to study in detail to see if his structuring was more or less legitimate and profitable. In none of these cases did I find his work unhelpful. Mosiah 25:8b-11 was one of these passages. This passage has a semantically and syntactically parallelistic structure with each element consisting of a condition and a response to the condition:

a  For when they beheld those
b      that had been delivered out of bondage,
c     they were filled with exceeding great joy.
d  And again when they thought of their brethren
  e  who had been slain by the Lamanites
  f  they were filled with sorrow
  g  and even shed many tears of sorrow
h  and again when they thought
  i  of the immediate goodness of God
  j  and his power
  k  in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the
      Lamanites
  l  they did raise their voices
  m  and gave thanks to God
  n  and again when they thought upon the Lamanites
  o  who were their brethren
  p  of their sinful
  q  and polluted state
  r  they were filled with
  s  pain
  t  and anguish
  u  for the welfare of their souls

We have here four parallel sections (a-c, d-g, h-m, n-u). Each section begins with a conditional phrase (“when they…”) describing the people’s perception of or thinking about various people or about blessings (a: “beheld”; d: “thought”; h: “thought”; n: “thought”). Each conditional clause is accompanied by a main clause describing the accompanying response of the people (c: joy; f-g: sorrow; l-m: thanks; r-s: pain and anguish). Three of the sections are similar in providing relative clauses modifying the people being beheld or thought about (b, e, o). Section h-m is unique since it lacks such a relative clause. Yet there is the same balance of words in this
section as in the other sections with the long object of thought and prepositional phrase in i-k. Thus, rhythm is kept while variation occurs in the four sections. Other variations occur. In the second section we find two conjoined phrases for the main clause (f, g) instead of one (cf. c). Likewise in section three we find two conjoined statements (l-m) in the main clause. Section four has both a relative clause (o) like sections one and two (b, e) and an object of thought (in two parts: p, q) like section three. Note that the relative clause in section four intervenes between the verb “thought” in n and the object of thought in p-q. The main clause in the fourth section has only one sentence (r-u) as opposed to the conjoined forms in f-g and l-m, but has the conjoined elements “pain and anguish” which imitates the other dual phrase forms. The fourth section’s main clause also has the prepositional phrase “for the welfare of their souls” not paralleled in the other sections.

The differences amidst similarities in the four sections exhibit the dynamics of Book of Mormon narrative. As in the statement-counterstatement form, noted above, the similarities in the sections create expectations for the reader. A momentum is established and the reader is carried along with it. The variations, however, provide scenic change during the reader’s travel and this influences meaning. For example, by the time the reader begins to recognize a pattern about halfway through the second section, he or she begins to expect repetition of the form experienced in section one. The doubling of the phrase in the main clause in f-g, however, is noticeable vis-à-vis that of section one and consequently adds emphasis to f-g. Semantically, the adverb “even” in g contributes to this emphasis perceptible through form. In addition to variations and their effects in the other sections, the general play of content against form creates potentials in the story’s circuit. Most notable in this example is the alternation of positive and negative events and sentiments. Section one begins with the deliverance of those in bondage and accompanying joy; section two, in contrast, reflects on those who had been slain and accompanying sorrow; section three returns to a positive tone by treating the good of God and praise of him; section four turns back to a negative issue: the sinfulness of the Lamanites and concomitant pain and anguish. In a way, section three really goes with section one, and section four with section two. One could rearrange the passage in this way and not disturb the information to be conveyed. But the literary alternation creates a reversal in polarity from section to
section. Thus the passage conveys not only data but an experience too, which together constitute the meaning of the passage.

The structuring in each of these four examples is like that found in Brown’s and thus indicates the utility of Brown’s work. It aids in the quick perception of structures. These examples also show that the Book of Mormon is formally rich. This richness involves much more than parallelism, contra Brown. While the structures in the last three examples are parallelistic, they are significantly different from one another. And the example of embedding does not fit under the category of parallelism. This diversity indicates that we must go beyond the category of parallelism, particularly that inspired by biblical studies, in analyzing the structural character of the Book of Mormon. The diversity in form also indicates that the Book of Mormon has its own unique literary character and alerts us to a methodological priority. As we analyze the book from a literary perspective, we should first do so in terms of its own literary character. Just as in general comparative studies phenomena must be examined and understood in their own cultural contexts before comparison takes place, so we must examine the literary character of the Book of Mormon in its own context before turning to comparison with other literatures, modern or ancient. This way we avoid imposing outside categories on the Book of Mormon text which brings skewed descriptions of the literature.

In sum, Brown’s work is a serviceable, though limited, contribution to literary studies of the Book of Mormon. If the secondary material is stripped away, particularly the unsophisticated historical and theological arguments, the remaining structured text of the Book of Mormon—which is not trustworthy as a critical text—can serve as a stimulus to more definitive work.