Assessing the Broad Impact of Jack Welch's Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon

Robert F. Smith
The attitude held by certain sectors of the anti-Mormon crowd has changed over the years, even to the point where some no longer deny the literary merit and beauty of the Book of Mormon. Although an assessment of the impact of Jack Welch’s work and writing on chiasmus may be premature, it is clear that his work on the subject incited the expansion of other literary analyses of the Book of Mormon and encouraged the publication of their results. Welch’s work influenced studies and analyses on chiasmus in Classic Mayan texts, and his publications have contributed much to the discipline of chiastic analyses.
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—ROBERT F. SMITH—

[The Book of Mormon is] the most gross, the most ridiculous, the most imbecile, the most contemptible concern, that was ever attempted to be palmed off upon society as a revelation.

Origen Bacheler,
Mormonism Exposed

Have Anti-Mormon Assessments Changed?

The anti-Mormon community (if there really is such a thing!) has long scoffed at any suggestion of literary or religious merit in the Book of Mormon. Yet today, some sectors of the anti-Mormon crowd are actually prepared to frankly accept the beauty and power of the Book of Mormon—openly admitting and claiming that, even if it is unhistorical, apocryphal, and fictional, the Book of Mormon is nonetheless a “sacred text” that “makes a powerful statement of humanity’s worth in a world where human worth is everywhere questioned,” and does indeed include visions and sermons of “beauty and brilliance” in a variety of literary genres, including “parables, poetry, hyperbole, psalms, historical verisimilitude,” etc. What has brought about this radical change in attitude for some sectors of the anti-Mormon community? Could it be a relatively recent legacy of the considerable scholarship now available assaying the literary value of the Book of Mormon? And can it be that this major change in attitude followed mainly on the heels of the very interesting discoveries made just forty years ago by young Elder John W. “Jack” Welch while on his German-speaking LDS mission in and around Regensburg, Germany? For, following Hugh Nibley’s compelling publications in other areas, Welch’s work opened up a breathtaking panorama of the true range of possibilities in literary and textual studies of the Book of Mormon, bringing new life and gravitas to the intellectual study of Mormonism.
Is an Assessment Premature?

We are only now beginning to grasp the broad implications of Jack’s very accessible publications and lectures on chiasmus, so any assessment may at this stage be premature. Still, there are some things which may rightly be said:

Jack’s work seems to have provided just the right amount of impetus to get many literary analyses of the Book of Mormon off the ground and into print. We can credit not only his 1979 founding of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), but also a preceding, exciting decade of publication and firesides on chiasmus (how many were repeatedly cloned on audio- and videotape?) leading up to that more systematic and broadscale effort at FARMS to print and distribute very recent and substantial research on the Book of Mormon, which was not otherwise easily accessible. Thus, Jack’s efforts to plumb the depths of chiasmus during the 1970s also stimulated other types of literary analysis of the Book of Mormon. Many faithful Mormon scholars have rightly surmised that where chiasmus could be found, there just might be other literary discoveries to be made.

As a classicist and New Testament scholar who was also a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Oxford University (1970–1972), Jack Welch had already been thinking along those broader lines. Thus, while in law school at Duke University, he took classes on intertestamental literature from the renowned James H. Charlesworth. It quickly became obvious (if not already clear from the work of Sperry and Nibley) that more than chiasmus was at issue, and that a grounding in Judaica and the whole range of ancient literature would be relevant to the study of the Book of Mormon. There is little doubt that a true “blossoming” of such studies has taken place in recent decades.

The work at FARMS has received primary credit for the fundamental defeat of evangelical (and secular) anti-Mormon efforts. Anti-Mormon polemical apologetics have been rendered largely ineffective, according to Protestant scholars Paul Owen and Carl Mosser² and Roman Catholic scholar Massimo Introvigne.⁷ There have been other worthwhile discoveries made in the course of FARMS’s large-scale basic research projects, which have had unforeseen affects, many of which have yet to see widespread publication or correlation. Some parade examples from Mesoamerican studies follow.

Chiasmus in Mesoamerica

For two pioneers in deciphering Mayan inscriptions (Nicholas Hopkins and his late wife, Kathryn Josserand), the matter has been quite clear:

In terms of Classic Maya literary canons, this kind of [chiastic] structure marks a text as very formal, like modern Mayan prayers, which consist entirely of couplets, often nested in this fashion.⁸

As an example, they present a creation text from the vertical east side of Quirigua Stela C (Monument 3), B5–15 (CR to end), arranged as ABCCCBBA, with the three C-statements “as the peak event of this episode”—which is a report on the placing of

Quirigua Stela C contains a creation text in a chiastic form. Drawing by Annie Hunter.
the Three Hearth Stones in the sky (the stars Rigel, Saiph, and Alnitak of Orion) by the gods at the time of creation.\(^9\) Going a bit further than Hopkins and Josserand, we may note that the text begins and ends with a 13-baktun date statement:

\[
\begin{align*}
A & \quad 13.0.0.0.0, \text{ day 4 Ahau, month 8 Cumku, crossed bands event,} \\
B & \quad \text{Three stones were set,} \\
C & \quad \begin{align*}
& \text{The Paddlers erected a stone; it happened at 5 Sky House, Jaguar Throne stone,} \\
& \text{The Black God erected a stone; it happened at Earth Center Place, Serpent Throne stone,} \\
& \text{And then it happened that Itzamna set a stone, Water-Lily Throne stone; it happened at Sky Place,} \\
& \text{New, three-stone place,}
\end{align*} \\
A & \quad 13 \text{ baktuns were completed under the authority of 6 Sky Lord (Wac Chan Ahau).}^{11}
\end{align*}
\]

Many other examples can be provided from well-known Classic Mayan texts and glyptic art, such as those presented in the form of text, art, and icon in the carved tablets arranged as triptychs in the funerary temples at Palenque. They include powerful visual chiasms there in the Tablets of the Sun, Cross, and Foliated Cross.\(^{12}\)

Kathryn Josserand also pointed out an ABBA sentence in the Palenque Table of 96 Glyphs, L1-K4, Second Episode, last sentence, at 9.17.13.0.7—the 1st Katun anniversary of Lord Kuk II:

\[
\begin{align*}
A & \quad \text{And then he completed his first katun as ahau} \\
B & \quad \text{He erected a monument (this stone!)} \\
B & \quad \text{He sacrificed (?) under the auspices of Pacal} \\
A & \quad \text{And then he finished his first katun as ahau}^{13}
\end{align*}
\]

Josserand gave credit for this discovery to the late Richard A. De Long, who had delivered a paper on the subject in June 1986 at the Sixth Palenque Round Table. De Long, a member of the RLDS Church (now Community of Christ) and former professor at Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa, had in turn been deeply influenced by the work of Jack Welch. De Long made a point of frequently attending Palenque Round Tables as well as Linda Schele’s University of Texas workshops on Maya hieroglyphs—often funded by the RLDS Foundation for Research on Ancient America (FRAA)—from which he regularly returned with interesting
reports on the chiastic and archeological implications. Indeed, for a period of about a quarter-century, Dr. De Long and I compared notes on the phenomenon of chiasticus, while he kept me and his RLDS friends informed of the latest developments on chiasticus in Mesoamerican literature and the Book of Mormon. De Long reported to me, for example, that the late Evon Z. Vogt had found and published a chiastic text in his study of the highland Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantán, Chiapas, Mexico. Elsewhere Mayan use of chiasticus has been found in Izapa Stele 5, in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, and in the *Popol Vuh.*

**Inter Alia: Connections Further Afield**

Many of these initial discoveries took place without fanfare and under the radar. Even Jack was unaware of these particular far-reaching effects of his initial stimulus. Yet without his original discovery of chiasticus in the Book of Mormon, there might never have been the resultant cross-fertilization of ideas and direct applications among so many disciplines. Jack began by speaking to interested fellow Mormons, then prepared an analysis of chiasticus in Ugaritic that was published in a learned, international journal (on the recommendation of a Jesuit scholar at the
Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, the late Mitchell Dahood), and began corresponding with an Israeli scholar (Yehuda T. Radday) who helped him assemble a group of contributors to a one-volume, broad-scale treatment of chiasmus in ancient Near Eastern and Classical literature and in the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{19} This attracted the attention of a number of scholars who actually came to Provo, Utah, to visit—including a Capucin Monk from Sicily (Father Angelico di Marco\textsuperscript{20}), a district judge from Jerusalem (Jacob Bazak\textsuperscript{21}), and a gaggle of Near Eastern scholars who had some very nice things to say about Jack’s work. I was there, and I heard them say so, and I continue to read comments along such lines.\textsuperscript{22}

Now, of course, studies of chiasmus in ancient Near Eastern literature have had a long and distinguished history. Jack did not discover the phe-
nomenon of chiasmus in the Bible or the ancient Near East, but he has made some significant contributions to such studies. Moreover, no one else has done more to gather and publish information on what is available in the way of chiastic analyses. Finally, Jack clearly defined how to assay the value of any given chiasm or chiastic claim. There remain plenty of areas of dispute about individual application of the chiastic mode of rhetorical analysis to this or that literature, but there is no doubt among most scholars that the phenomenon is real and is useful.
the second rule states that the 
chewa in the middle of
the word is silent. However, the
customary, rapid pronun-
ciation relaxes the first rule.
This is how the general popu-
lation of the modern State
of Israel (a modern version of
Biblical Hebrew) pronounces
words with a 
chewa at the
beginning of the word. For
instance, the word 
slichen ("excuse me") is
pronounced 
ichen instead of selicha. By
comparison, the custom-
ary pronunciation confirms
that the hypothetical 
chewa that had to be placed under
the lamem of Liuhona is
practically always silent.

A strict interpretation of
the rule of pronouncing the
chewa at the beginning of the
word is much relaxed in practice.
It is not followed in today’s
spoken Hebrew, and nobody
is ever heard to plod in 600 bc
the Lehitethes would follow such
a puritan or scholastic applica-
tion of the formal rule when
the written words did not have
vowels (or very few, see the
texts of the Dead
Sea Scrolls, dated 200 bc) or
when the rule was not fixed
as yet.

12. Jershon, which is based on the
verb "to inherit," is used near
various forms of the word
inheret in the surrounding
verses of Alma 27:22. Nahom,
which means "to groan" in
mourning, is used in the verse
before the "daughters of Is-
mael did mourn exceedingly"
(1 Nephi 16:34–35).

13. As in other languages, in
modern Hebrew there is a
difference between efe וניק
"where" (see also the Ger-
man wo) and ליען וניק which
is formed by le ו and an ויק,
which does not have the "ה he local" (see also the German
wothin). The archaic Hebrew
instead of ו had ויק end-
ing with the "ה he local."
at the Sexta Mesa Redonda de Palenque, June 1986, in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico.


15. In his review of Joseph Allen’s claims along these lines, John E. Clark notes that it is “mirror imagery” or “bilateral symmetry,” not chiasmus, thus missing the forest for the trees. See John E. Clark, “Searching for Book of Mormon Lands in Middle America,” FARMS Review 16/2 (2004): 42–43.


22. Victor A. Hurwitz, In Anum irrum: Literary Structures in the Non-Juridical Sections of Codex Hammurabi, Samuel Noah Kramer Occasional Publications 15 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1994), 58 n. 67, lauds Welch’s contribution and then adds: “There seems to be no end to the use of long and short range chiasm in ancient literature and it may now be considered a well established and wide spread fact of literary style.”


25. In reviewing a book on symmetrical patterns of repetition (direct and chaotic) in Hebrew and Ugaritic, H. Van Dyke Parunak noted that the author “does not appreciate the wide repertoire of structural mechanisms that ancient writers constructed from the primitive elements of alternation and chiasm. As a result, his analyses often miss important nuances” (Parunak, review of Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure, and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background, by Yitzhak Avishur, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 44/2 [2003]: 326).

26. Yehuda T. Radday stated unequivocally that “chiasitic structure . . . is more than an artificial or artistic device. If it were nothing else, it would hardly warrant more than a passing illustration of a few exemplary passages. It is rather, and most remarkably so, a key to meaning. Not paying sufficient attention to it may result in failure to grasp the true theme” (Radday, “Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative,” in Chiasmus in Antiquity, 51).

The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later
John W. Welch


4. For a full discussion of the structure of this speech, see John W. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” in King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,” ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 315–410. There are 2,467 words before this midpoint, and 2,476 words after it.


6. All of my 1967 letters and notes are being deposited in the Chiasmus Collection in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.


15. Welch, “How Much Was Known about Chiasmus in 1829,” 78.

