

Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: A Remarkable Literary Art

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Introduction

The American Heritage Dictionary defines chiasmus as "a rhetorical inversion of the second of two parallel structures, as in He went to the theater, but home went she."

This could be diagramed to form a rhetorical X as follows:

a) **He went to the**
b) **theater,**
c) **but**
b) **home**
a) **went she.**

More familiar examples are:

Old King Cole
was a merry old soul,
and a merry old soul
was he.

He who fails to prepare, prepares to fail.

He that findeth his life shall lose it;
And he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

While this simple form of chiasmus is common in literature, chiasmi of more than two elements are almost unknown outside of ancient writings. They are seen as particularly common in Hebrew where there appears to be no limit to the number of terms or ideas that can be employed.

For example, consider, the following Old Testament passages which are translated literally from Hebrew. In these passages it was necessary to go to the Hebrew in order to see the chiasmic structure. This is true of most instances of chiasmus in the Bible. They have been obscured by the translation process (the word order generally required by these structures is just not good English).

Genesis 7:21-23

- a) There died on the earth
- b) all birds,
- c) cattle,
- d) beasts and creeping things,
- e) man;
- f) all life
- g) died
- g) and was destroyed.
- f) Every living thing
- e) both man,
- d) creeping things,
- c) cattle,
- b) birds,
- a) were destroyed from the earth.

Psalms 3:7-8

- a) Save me,
- b) O my God,
- c) for thou has smitten
- d) all my enemies
- e) on the cheekbone;
- e) The teeth
- d) of the wicked
- c) thou hast broken;
- b) to Jehovah,
- a) the salvation.

Here is one rather significant Old Testament chiasm that has survived translation. This is the seemingly unlikely "eye for an eye" chapter, Leviticus 24. This is a legal document describing transgressions and proscribing punishment. Note that the structure is undeniably chiasmic: killing a man, killing a beast, and causing a blemish; followed by the same list in reverse order. At the center is the principle: "eye for an eye." In other words, *let the punishment fit the crime*. John Welch suggests that the chiasmic structure was used here to represent the balanced nature of this law. Welch says, "What Moses is teaching the people is a principle of God's justice: that justice should be balanced, that it should match the nature of the crime and should be applied even-handedly. The chiasmic form gives that kind of balance; it shows the nature of the reciprocal, what we call 'talionic' justice, which is a part of the Israelite jurisprudence."

Leviticus 24 Chiasmus

- a) Then **the Lord spake unto Moses**
- b) **Bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp; and let all that heard him...stone him**
- c) **Thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying**
- d) Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin... **the stranger as well as he that is born in the land**
- e) **And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death**
- f) **And he that killeth a beast** shall make it good, beast for beast
- g) and if a man **cause a blemish** in his neighbor so shall it be done to him
Breach for breach
- h) **Eye for eye**
Tooth for tooth
- g) As he hath **caused a blemish** in a man, so shall it be done to him
- f) **And he that killeth a beast**, he shall restore it
- e) **And he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death**
- d) Ye shall have one manner of law for the **stranger and well as one of your own country**
- c) **And Moses spake to the children of Israel**
- b) **Bring forth him that had cursed out of the camp and stone him with stones**
- a) They did as **the Lord commanded Moses**

Why Did the Ancient Peoples Use Chiasmus?

An interesting website sponsored by Penn State University, provides an on-line art class (unfortunately, access to this site now requires payment of tuition for the course). Lesson 11 of this class is on chiasmus in art. The introduction to this lesson includes the following explanation and description of chiasmus:

"Why Chiasmus? In the very long time before we started to write things down in lap-top computers, people had to rely on their memories. Think of throwing stuff in a box. If you just toss it in, it is jumbled, not compact, and things get broken. If you pack the box, however, you can make sure that all available space is used safely and well: that objects fit together; the ones you need often are on top, and that nothing gets lost.

"Just so with memory. It needs a little help to get along, and early peoples used 'mnemonic devices,' usually involving an imagined space into which they put things to be remembered. . . Here's where chiasmus came in.

"Chiasmus was a kind of formula that allowed each normal object to be mirrored in a double. The double was 'stored' in a disguised form, present but concealed. As the sequence progressed, the double relationship intensified . . . , and in subsequent scenes the meaning of the doubled elements was revealed."

The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon

Brother John W. Welch, now recognized as an international expert on chiasmus, was first introduced to this form of poetic parallelism in 1967. He was then serving as a missionary in the predominantly Catholic town of Regensburg, Germany. He and his companion, seeking to get better acquainted with the Regensburg religious community, used their *diversion day* to attend some lectures at one of the many theological seminaries. At one of these the lecturer was very excited about a recently discovered ancient literary form, called *chiasmus*, which was believed to be an evidence of Hebrew authorship. Learning of the unique Hebrew fondness for this form of expression, Brother Welch determined to search the Book of Mormon for possible evidence of Chiasmic structures similar to those found in the Bible.

Mosiah 5:10-12

The first chiasmus discovered in the Book of Mormon

- a) And now . . . whosoever shall not take upon him the *name of Christ*
- b) must be *called* by some other name;
- c) therefore, he findeth himself on the *left hand* of God.
- d) I would that ye should *remember* also, that this is the name . . .
- e) that never should be *blotted out*,
- f) except it be through *transgression*;
- f') therefore, 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 the 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.

His search was rewarded by the discovery of numerous examples of such structures. Show at the right is the first of these. This is found right at the end of King Benjamin's great farewell address to his people.

These verses are one of the most beautifully balanced examples of chiasmus found anywhere. The subject, transgression, is clearly placed at the center. Benjamin even points to that center with his "*therefore*." Notice, the first three elements speak of the transgressor, while the last three elements are an admonition to avoid the transgressor's path. The fourth element (*d*), admonishes the reader to *remember the name*. The second (*d*) element then intensifies this same thought with the admonition to "*retain the name written always in your heart*." John Welch makes the further point that the phrase "*left hand of God*," so perfectly balanced in the two (*c*) elements, occurs nowhere else in the Book of Mormon.

Chiasmus in the Book Mosiah

Looking further at Benjamin's speech, the whole of Mosiah chapter 3 is a chiasmus. Benjamin tells us that the message of this chapter was given to him by an angel. Perhaps, these are the very words spoken by that heavenly messenger. This is also an example of what I call a concept chiasm. Looking at the chapter as a whole, it is the concepts that are presented in a chiasmic form. At the same time, imbedded at the center of this concept chiasm is a beautiful six element textual chiasm, expressing the central message of this chapter, of King Benjamin's speech, and arguably the central message of the entire Book of Mormon. Yet, with all this structure, the text reads smoothly.

The Chiasmus of Mosiah 3

CHRIST WILL COME TO THE EARTH AND

CHRIST WILL JUDGE THE WORLD

HE WILL ATONE FOR THE SINS OF ALL WHO REPENT OR IGNORANTLY SINNED

SINCE CHILDREN ARE BLAMELESS, HE ATONETH FOR THEIR SINS

A NATURAL MAN UNLESS HE BECOMES HUMBLE LIKE A LITTLE CHILD

a) but men drink damnation to their souls except they humble themselves

b) and become as little children,

c) and believe that salvation . . . is . . . in and through the atoning blood of Christ

THE NATURAL MAN IS AN ENEMY TO GOD

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 yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,

d') And putteth off the natural man

TO PUT OFF THE NATURAL MAN HE MUST BECOME HUMBLE LIKE A CHILD

c') becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord,

b') and becometh as a child

a') submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things. . .

SOON NONE WILL BE BLAMELESS BUT LITTLE CHILDREN

AS PEOPLE ARE TAUGHT OF CHRIST THEY ARE NO MORE BLAMELESS

EVERY MAN WILL BE JUDGED ACCORDING TO HIS WORKS

THOSE WHO DO NOT REPENT MUST SUFFER MISERY AND ENDLESS TORMENT

While there is no requirement, in Mosiah 3, to be aware of this structure in order to understand the message, that awareness does enhance the understanding of Benjamin's message. Reference to this

structure is very helpful as an aid in appreciating the intent of the author. Unlike modern literary formats which tend to build to a climax with the focus of the message coming at the end, chiasmus places the emphasis at the center. Perhaps this is the source of our phrase, *central message*. Around that center is built a balanced presentation of those concepts which support or are otherwise related to this central concept.

Notice that our understanding of the message is increased by attending to the paired statements identified by this chiastic structure:

- l Christ will come to the earth and will suffer more that man can suffer – those who do not repent must suffer misery and endless torment.
- l Christ will judge the world – every man will be judged according to his works.
- l Christ will atone for the sins of all who repent of ignorantly sinned – as people are taught of Christ they are no more blameless.
- l Since children are blameless, he atoneth for their sins – soon none will be blameless but little children.

This is not mere reiteration of the same words. The repetition amplifies the concept introduced previously. The full meaning can only be appreciated as we considered these two parts of the message together.

Not only is Mosiah, Chapter 3, constructed as a chiasm, there is a chiastic characteristic clearly observable in the outline of the total Book of Mosiah. The book begins with the message of an angel as delivered to the people by their king. It records the converting power of that message and the mighty change of heart, through which the people are *born again* and become the *sons and daughters of Christ*. It ends with the message of an angel to five wayward youth, who then repent of their sins and are born of the Spirit – *born again* and become *sons of God*. The focus, the central message of the chiasm, is Abinadi's testimony of Christ, together with Alma's conversion and teachings to his followers. At the very center is Abinadi's affirmation that Christ, through the atonement, is the *Father of all whose sins he has born – His seed!*

The Whole Book of Mosiah is a Chiasmus

- a) King Benjamin exhorts his sons (1:1-8)
- b) Mosiah chosen king to succeed his father (1:10)
- c) Mosiah receives the records (1:16)
- d) **Benjamin's speech and the words of an angel of the Lord** (2:9-5:15)
- e) People enter into a covenant (6:1)
- f) Priests consecrated (6:3)
- g) Ammon leaves Zarahemla for the land of Nephi (7:1-6)
- h) People Limhi in bondage, Ammon put in prison (7:15)
- i) The 24 gold plates (8:9)
- j) The record of Zeniff begins as he leaves Zarahemla (9:1)
- k) Zeniff prevails against the Lamanites (9:14-10:20)
- l) Noah and his priests (11:1-15)
- m) Abinadi persecuted and thrown in prison (11-12)
- n) **Abinadi reads Isaiah's prophecies of Christ** (13-14)
- n') **Abinadi make his own prophecies of Christ** (15-16)
- m') Abinadi persecuted and killed (17:5-20)
- l') Noah and his priests (18:32-20:5)
- k') Lamanites threaten the people of Limhi (20:6-26)
- j') Record of Zeniff ends as Limhi's people leave the land of Nephi
- i') The 24 gold plates (21:27, 22:14)
- h') People of Alma in bondage (23)
- g') Alma leaves the land of Nephi for Zarahemla (24)
- f') The Church organized by Alma (25:14-24)
- e') Unbelievers refuse to enter covenant (26:1-4)
- d') **The words of Alma and the words of an angel of the Lord** (26-27)
- c') Alma the Younger receives the records (28:20)
- b') Judges chosen instead of a king (29:5-32)
- a') Mosiah exhorts his people (29:5-32)

Of course, history does not usually occur in a chiastic order and this chapter is primarily narrative history. May that be the reason that the Book of Mosiah contains so many flash backs? They're all necessary, right where they occur, to enable the accomplishment of this chiastic structure.

An unbelievable 15 elements are organized with precision in this smooth flowing text. The 24 gold plates are incidently referred to by Mosiah just where that reference is required by the structure. The story returns to the people of Alma just at the point where that element of the history fits in the structure. Yet, as we read the record, the order of events are so naturally presented that we would be hard pressed to suggest any significant modifications.

In this instance, most pairs add little of significance other than the natural continuation of the story. The intent of the structure appears to be the emphasis of the process, significance, and meaning of *born again*. It is the paired conversion stories (Mosiah 3-5 and Mosiah 27) that Mormon is highlighting in this structure. Mormon is using this structure to help us understand that the key to these conversions – the central concept – is the atonement of Jesus Christ. Both individuals and nations can, must, be *born again* and become sons and daughters of God: *God the Son*, who through the atonement has become the *Father* of this second birth. Those who "are desirous to come into the fold of God, and be called his people" (take upon them his name?); "have entered into a covenant with him, (Christ) that [they] will serve him and keep his commandments" (Mosiah 18:8, 10) – "these are his seed" (Mosiah 15:11-12). Yes, Christ is the *Father and the Son* (Mosiah 15:2).

Chiasmus in First Nephi

Not only is the structure of the Book of Mosiah chiastic, 1 Nephi also follows this same design. Have you ever wondered why there is both a 1st and 2nd Nephi? No other prophet in the Book of Mormon has two books named after him. The answer is now clear. First Nephi is a special document prepared by Nephi to make very clear to his descendants the Nephite right to rule, and the reasons for their authority.

In stating his arguments, Nephi used a very complex structure. This book is perhaps the most sophisticated use of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. Nephi was undoubtedly the teacher of this art. It was he who brought it from Jerusalem. In First Nephi he teaches by example.

Only a surface view of Nephi's genius is revealed in the following chiastic outline. This is the so called *tip of the ice berg*. The fuller details of this structure will be the subject of the tenth lesson titled, *Nephi's Masterpiece*.

The Chiastic Outline of First Nephi

- A) Lehi's dream leads him to prophesy warnings to the Jews (Ch. 1)
- B) The departure from Jerusalem (2)
- C) Nephi accomplishes a great feat in obtaining the Brass Plates and the brothers are confounded (3-5)
- D) The Brass Plates, a source of *spiritual* guidance as they travel through the wilderness of this life towards the *spiritual* promised land: *Heaven*
- E) Ishmael joins the group with his daughters (7)
- F) The Tree of Life (8)
 - G) Lehi prophesies about the Old World and the Coming of the Lamb (10)
 - H) Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord (11)
 - G') Nephi prophesies about the New World and the Coming of the Lamb (12-14)
- F') The Tree of Life interpreted (15)
- E') The sons of Lehi marry the daughters of Ishmael and Ishmael Dies (16)
- D') The Brass Ball, the Liahona, a source of *physical* guidance as they traveled through the wilderness on their way to the promised land: *America*
- C') Nephi accomplishes a great feat by building a ship and the brothers are confounded (17)
- B') The departure from the Old World (18)
- A') Nephi warns the Jews and quotes the prophecies of Isaiah (19-22)

Did All Book of Mormon Writers Use Chiasmus?

This is an important question and the answer is interesting and enlightening. A careful analysis of the text suggests that the majority of the chiastic passages were written by three Book of Mormon authors: Nephi, Benjamin, and Alma. Notable also are the expressions of Abinadi and Amulek. Abinadi, in the few short chapters we have of his teachings made masterful use of chiasmus. Also, Amulek expressions are dotted with simple chiastic passages. The teachings of Christ, in 3 Nephi, are rich with chiastic, as well as a wide verity of poetic structures. While the quoted writings of Isaiah are richly poetic, chiasm is rare in Isaiah. The personal writings of both Mormon and Moroni are almost barren of chiasmus. In the case of Moroni, two notable exceptions are his comments in Ether 12 and:

"he will manifest the truth of it unto you
by the power of the Holy Ghost.
And by the power of the Holy Ghost
ye may know the truth of all things."

Is this an example of a purposeful chiasm, or did the words just come out this way? Only Moroni knows.

There is only one significant example of Chiasmus by Mormon: the outline of the Book of Mosiah. At the same time, there are many passages in Mormon's abridgment that exhibit chiastic character. Many of these appear to be selections quoted by Mormon from other sources. A good example is Helaman 6:7-13.

Helaman 16:7-13 is the annual report for the sixty-fourth year of the reign of the Judges. This was a very good year for both Nephites and Lamanites. They were at peace. Not only that, they enjoyed free travel and commerce between their two peoples. They were both basking in an unprecedented prosperity.

The report describes this year in a beautifully balanced chiastic structure. Was a chiasm used to emphasize that this report was, perhaps for the first time, a disclosure of the year's affairs for both Nephite and Lamanite? While one report, the history is told twice, once for each of these peoples. Further, the report emphasized another two peoples, those of Lehi and of Mulek. John Welch suggest another possible reason for an official report to be made as a chiasmus. "*Using chiasmus*," he says, "*would insure against additions to or deletions from the text, since any alterations would be strikingly apparent.*"

Also, the annual report for the sixtieth year is a chiasm as are many status and descriptive statements throughout Mormon's abridgment. Are these examples where Mormon is quoting rather than abridging his source records.

I liken the Book of Mormon prophets use of chiasmus to my use of a highlighter. Over and over I find that those passages, particularly in the teaching of Alma and the writings of Nephi, which I have highlighted, turn out to be chiastic.

HELANAN 6:7-13

- (a) "And behold, there was peace in all the land,"
- (b) [Freedom of travel and trade in both lands is discussed]
- (c) "And it came to pass that they became exceedingly rich, both the Lamanites and the Nephites;
- (d) and they did have an exceeding plenty of gold, and of silver, and of all manner of precious metals, both in the land south and in the land north."
- "Now the land south was called Lehi and the land north was called Mulek, which was after the son of Zedekiah; for the Lord did bring Mulek into the land north, and Lehi into the land south."
- (d) "And behold, there was all manner of gold in both these lands, and of silver, and of precious ore of every kind;
- (c) and there were also curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it; and thus they did become rich."
- (b) [Economic prosperity in both lands discussed]
- (a) "And thus the sixty and fourth year did pass away in peace."

Going no further than the examination of chiasmus, the individuality of the Book of Mormon writers can be determined. Scanning a copy of the Book of Mormon that has been formatted to display these poetic structures, the teaching of Alma can almost infallibly be recognized, just by observing the complexity of the chiasmic structures.⁽²⁾

Alma, the Virtuoso of Chiasmus

By all criterion that might be considered, Alma is the chiastic expert. John Welch, who has literally written the book on Chiasmus, calls Alma's use of this literary form in Alma 36 "a masterpiece of composition, as good as any other use of chiasmus in world literature." Throughout the Book of Alma, Mormon's quotations from Alma teachings are accentuated by chiastic phrases. Some very elaborate and others simple, like these familiar words of Alma 37:34:

O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom
in thy youth
yea, learn in thy youth
to keep the commandments of God.

Notice that, even in this simple example, recognition of the structure enables a deeper awareness of Alma's message. Alma is here defining wisdom: *To learn to be wise is to learn to keep the commandments of God.*

In Alma 29, Alma cries out his urgent desire to declare repentance to all men. He then, beginning at verse 9, acknowledges that he is only an instrument to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way. The last half of the chapter expresses an ambivalence of joy – joy for those who repent, Joy in his success in "preaching the word," joy in the success of his brethren. Yet, the message of the chapter is that this success is too limited. Too many have not heard the word. Too many have not responded to the message. Too many have remained in captivity. This message is most powerfully expressed in the structure Alma has given to his words. The first half of the chapter (verses 1-8) are expressed in a beautifully well organized, complex, but complete chiasm. The second half (verses 9-17), are again expressed in a complex chiastic structure. However, unlike the first, this second contains an incomplete element (D). Yes, the Lord had deliver many out of bondage, yet there are still many in bondage. Alma is willing to acknowledge and accept the limits the Lord has placed upon him: "For behold the Lord doth grant unto all nations . . . , in wisdom, all he seeth fit that they should have" (v 8). He understands that "I ought to be content . . . I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm decree of a just God" (v 3-4). But, there is certainly an underlying element of discontent.

Many have repented; many have been converted; many have been delivered out of Satan's bondage – but, many are not saved. Does Alma chooses to express his frustration, not in word, but with an incomplete poetic structure placed right at the very center of this chiastic declaration of deliverance? Note, Alma acknowledges that the Lord did his part, He did the *work* required to deliver them from bondage, but they did not come to *his church*.

Am I reading too much into this? Perhaps. My point is not that this analysis is correct. I want to illustrate the additional dimension of study and investigation that the knowledge of these structures provide. We might be impressed with the evidential value of chiasmus and totally miss its richness in opening locks that might otherwise obscure our full understanding and appreciation of this ancient record.

Alma 29:8-17

- A) For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true.
- B) a) I know that which the Lord hath commanded me.
 b) and I glory in it.
 b) I do not glory of myself,
 a) but I glory in that which the Lord hath commanded me.
 a) yea, and this is my glory,
 b) that perhaps I may be an instrument in the
 c) hands of God to bring
 d) some soul to repentance;
 e) and this is my joy. And behold when I see many
 d) of my brethren truly penitent,
 c) and coming to the Lord their God,
 b) then is my soul
 a) filled with joy;
- C) then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea, then do I remember his merciful arm which he extend towards me.
- D) a) Yea and I also remember the captivity of my fathers;
 b) for I surely do know that the Lord
 c) did deliver them out of bondage,
 d) and by this did establish his church
 b) yea, the Lord God, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,
 c) did deliver them out of bondage.
 a) Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers:
 b) and that same God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians
 c) did deliver them out of bondage.
 d) Yea, and that same God did establish his church among them;
- C) yea, and that same God hath called me by a holy calling, to preach the word unto this people, and hath given me much success, in the which my joy is full.
- B) But I do not joy in my own success alone,
 a) but my joy is more full
 b) because of the success of my brethren,
 c) who have been up to the land of Nephi. Behold, they have labored exceedingly, and have brought forth much fruit; and how great shall be their reward!
 b) Now, when I think of the success of these my brethren my soul is carried away,
 a) even to the separation of it from the body, as it were, so great is my joy.
- A) And now may God grant unto these, my brethren, that they may sit down in the kingdom of God; yea, and also all those who are the fruit of their labors that they may go no more out, but that they may praise him forever. And may God grant that it may be done according to my words, even as I have spoken, Amen.

Regarding evidence. I was interested in the views of one Book of Mormon critic. He readily acknowledged that the evidence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is overwhelming. He accepted this as proof that Joseph Smith could not have authored the book. This didn't phase him a bit. He sees it only as further evidence of the truth of his view of the book's Satanic origin. He says, "Satan surely knows Hebrew and ancient history. If he designed to produce a false piece of Hebrew scripture, should we not *expect* to find Hebrew elements therein?" He further exclaims that "Hebraic elements are not proof, or even *evidence*, that the Book of Mormon is of ancient origin. It just as may well be evidence for an *author* who was around anciently."

This emphasizes the necessity of a Spiritual witness. Chiasmus tells us that the book *could* be true not that it is true. It's one more necessary tread in the evidence tapestry. Almost we could say that the absence of chiasmus from the Book of Mormon would be a significant deterrent to its acceptance as a Hebrew record. But, the contribution of Alma goes well beyond the mere presence of chiasmus.

Shown next is an elaborate chiasmus found in Alma 41:13-15. All don't accept this as chiasmic, but there is no question as to its poetic nature. Notice the clever twist: After listing four pairs of terms, Alma pairs two lists of four terms and reverses their order at the same time. This is the highest form of literary artistry.

However, it's Alma's recounting of his conversion to his son Helaman in chapter 36 that John Welch calls "*The Masterpiece*."

ALMA 41:13-15 is Pure Poetry

- a) My son, the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back
 b) evil for evil carnal for carnal devilish for devilish -
 w1 w2 good for that which is good,
 x1 x2 righteous for that which is righteous,
 y1 y2 just for that which is just,
 z1 z2 merciful for that which is merciful;
 c) Therefore my son see that thou art
 z'1 merciful unto your brethren,
 y'1 deal justly,
 x'1 judge righteously,
 w'1 and do good continually;
 c) and if ye do all these things, ye shall receive your reward, yea,
 z'2 ye shall have mercy restored unto you again,
 y'2 ye shall have justice restored unto you again,
 x'2 ye shall have righteous judgment restored unto you again,
 w'2 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 *Masterpiece* – The Chiasmus of Alma 36

"*The Masterpiece*" is the title of John Welch's rather lengthy article on Alma 36 in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*. In this article, Welch supports his claim that Alma 36 is one of the finest know examples of the chiasmic art. He does this by pursuing a six level examination of this chapter. This examination includes:

1. The obvious 17 element chiasmic structure shown in the following figure. This describes what Welch calls the *girders* of this chiasm.
2. A discussion of the full text of Alma 36, illustrating the *panels of text* that fill in the gaps. In this examination imbedded chiasmi and other poetic structures become apparent.
3. The relationship between pairs is next discussed. This is similar to the above discussion of the pairs in Mosiah 3. It is in this exploration of pair relationships that the true depth and artistry of the chiasm becomes apparent.
4. Welch next examines what he calls the *weaving factor*. This is really a study of the transition between sections, between *girders*. What were the compromises made to make this work. He discovers a smooth flow. Again the great skill of the artist is demonstrated as this complex structure is created in a seamless fashion – there are no breaks or discontinuities. In no place does the structure intrude upon the reader. It remains silent in the background.
5. Using a standard twelve point test of *degree of chiasmity*, Welch re-examines the characteristics and qualities of Alma 36. He concludes, "The degree of chiasmus in Alma 36 is extremely high and can best be explained by concluding that Alma learned it as part of a long literary tradition extending back to Old Testament prophets."

6. Finally, Welch compares Alma's accounts of his conversion in Alma 36 and Mosiah 27. He identifies distinctive phrases that are part of both accounts. He says that from this examination "it is obvious that the same person made both statements. Welch further observes: "After Alma had reflected on his experience for over twenty years, he regrouped all the elements from the dark side of his conversion and placed them in the first half of Alma 36. Then he took all the joyous factors and concentrated them into the second half of Alma 36. In short, he reorganized his earlier words into a masterful single statement of his conversion."

No attempt will be made here to fully explore this extraordinary example of the chiasmic art. Only the *girders* will be exposed and laid along side an alternate and expanded view of this masterful composition.

The Magnificent Chiasmus of Alma 36

- a) My son give ear to my **words** (v 1)
- b) **Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land** (v 1)
- c) **Do as I have done** (v 2)
- d) **Remember** the **captivity** of our fathers (v 2)
- e) They were in **bondage** (v 2)
- f) He surely did **deliver them** (v 2)
- g) **Trust in God** (v 3)
- h) **Supported in trials, troubles and afflictions** (v 3)
- i) **I know** this not of myself but **of God** (v 4)
- j) **Born of God** (v 5)
- k) **I sought to destroy the church** (v 6-9)
- l) **My limbs** were paralyzed (v 10)
- m) Fear of the **presence of God** (v 14-15)
- n) **Pains of a damned soul** (v 16)
- o) **Harrowed up by memory of sins** (v 17)
- p) **I remembered Jesus Christ, a son of God** (v 17)
- p) **I cried, Jesus, son of God** (v 18)
- o) **Harrowed up by memory of sins no more** (v 19)
- n) **Joy as exceeding as was the pain** (v 20)
- m) Long to be in the **presence of God** (v 22)
- l) **My limbs** received strength again (v 23)
- k) **I labored to bring souls to repentance** (v 24)
- j) **Born of God** (v 26)
- i) Therefore **my knowledge** is **of God** (26)
- h) **Supported under trials and troubles and afflictions** (v 27)
- g) **Trust in him** (v 27)
- f) He will **deliver me** (v 27)
- e) As God brought our fathers out of **bondage** and **captivity** (v 28-29)
- d) Retain in **remembrance** their captivity (v 28-29)
- c) **Know as I do know** (v 30)
- b) **Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land** (v 30)
- a) This according to his **word** (v 30)

Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is particularly impressive when we realize that, with some minor exceptions, the chiasmus in the Old and New Testaments have not survived translation. To study chiasmus in these records it is necessary to go back to the Hebrew and Greek texts. In the Book of

Mormon, however, chiasmus, as seen in these examples, is clearly visible in the English translation.

It should be obvious to the reader that the language characteristics here described could not have come from the mind of a frontier farm boy, no matter how brilliant his intellect. They, also would have been beyond the reach of the most educated in 1827. Even today, *chiasmus* is a lost art. The complexity of its composition, once understood and appreciated, leaves this student in awe. I question how any human mind, unaided by inspiration from above, could form language into such intricate structures while at the same time not only maintain but enhancing the meaning of the text.

While Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon into his own words, it's obvious that both the choice and order of those words were frequently very specifically controlled by the source from which he received the inspired understanding of the sense of the record.

Angela Crowell, provides a fitting conclusion to this brief study:

"We have in the Book of Mormon an ancient Semitic treasure – a masterpiece (this word is being over used in this paper) of literary style that has yet to reach its zenith in appreciation and acclaim. We are now unraveling the mystery of its language technique and are able to unveil it to the scholarly world as an impressive example of Hebraic artistry. Its future contribution to Biblical reseach will yet reveal the genius of its elegant poetic structures."

References:

1. The principle source for this paper is the FARMS publication, *Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon*, by John W. Welch. Other sources include John Welch's article by the same name included in *Book of Mormon Authorship*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds; "What does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove," by John Welch, included in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, also edited by Noel Reynolds; "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon or the Book of Mormon Does it Again," John Welch, *The New Era*, February 1972.
2. See Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns*. This book is a treasure for anyone who would desire to become more acquainted with chiasmus and other poetic structures in the Book of Mormon. He describes 24 different Hebrew forms of literary structure, discussing examples from both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. He then reproduces the entire text of the Book of Mormon, illustrating these structures as they appear throughout the text. He states that he has identified and formatted over 300 chiasmi in the current English edition of the Book of Mormon. My comments on the extent of chiasmus in the teachings of Alma are based on my examination of Parry's formatting of these passages.