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### *Leitwörter* in Helaman and 3 Nephi

Author(s): Ronald D. Anderson

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Ronald D. Anderson

## Introduction

According to Robert Alter, repetition of a word or phrase is one of the most common literary devices used in the narrative of the Bible (92). Martin Buber noted this stylistic element and called it *Leitwörter*, a German word meaning “leading words,” “guide words,” or “theme words.” The *Leitwort* theory is that when a word, word-root, or phrase recurs significantly in a text, the reader is able to decipher or grasp the meaning of the text by noting these repetitions and thus can determine its theme as well (Buber 284; Alter 93–95; Fishbane xii). Alter further explained this repetition of key words or key phrases in a text, stating:

The repetition of single words or brief phrases often exhibits a frequency, a saliency, and a thematic significance. . . . The one most prominent device involving the repetition of single words is the use of the *Leitwort*, the thematic key-word, as a way of enunciating and developing the moral, historical, psychological, or theological meanings of the story. (179–180; emphasis added)

Michael Fishbane discusses the phenomenon of *Leitwörter* as follows:

One particular recurrent and transparent technique is the *Leitwort* (theme-word). Because Hebrew words are essentially built around triliteral stems, the same stem may recur in one and the same text in different nominal, verbal, and adjectival forms. Such repetition,

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Ronald D. Anderson is a part-time instructor in Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University; he is on leave from the Church seminary and institute program.

where it occurs, give a text special texture; and it also serves to highlight major and minor features of content. A reader may thus be guided or provoked towards certain interpretations on the basis of theme-words recurrent in one or several texts which are thereby brought into association. And what applies to words is equally pertinent with respect to larger themes or motifs. Through such stylistic means, latent networks of intra- and inter- textual meaning may be perceived by an interpreter. (xii)

The main function of such *Leitwörter* seems to be to express the principal theme of a story. The narrative thus provides its own interpretation by repetition of what is essential to its understanding (Watson 288; Buber 52).

### Leitwörter in the Book of Helaman

In Helaman 5:1–5, Mormon explains that Helaman's sons, Nephi and Lehi, gave up the judgment-seat to preach the word of God for "they *remembered* the words which their father Helaman spake unto them." Mormon then cites a direct quotation from Helaman in which he repeats the word *remember* 13 times in seven verses, thus identifying the theme of his counsel to them.

Behold, my sons, I desire that ye should *remember* to keep the commandments of God. . . . Behold, I have given unto you the names of our first parents . . . that when you *remember* your names ye may *remember* them; and when ye *remember* them ye may *remember* their works; and when ye *remember* their works ye may know how that it is said, and also written, that they were good. . . . O *remember, remember, my sons . . . remember* that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ . . . *remember* that he cometh to redeem the world . . . and *remember* also the words which Amulek spake . . . that the Lord surely should come to redeem his people . . . and now, my sons, *remember, remember* that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation. . . . (Hel 5:6–12; emphasis added)

Helaman wanted his sons to remember to keep the commandments of God, to remember that Lehi and Nephi, their first parents, were good people and did good works, and he wanted

them to remember Jesus Christ. By naming his sons after their ancestors, he hoped to instill in their lives a memory device that would trigger their remembrance to keep the commandments and to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, just as their first parents had.

Stressing the importance of remembering, President Spencer W. Kimball, while speaking to a group of seminary and institute personnel in 1968, stated:

When you look in the dictionary for the most important word, do you know what it is? It could be “remember.” Because all of you have made covenants—you know what to do and you know how to do it—Our greatest need is to remember. That is why everyone goes to sacrament meeting every Sabbath day—to take the sacrament and listen to the priests pray that they . . . may always remember him and keep his commandments which he has given them. . . . Nobody should ever forget to go to sacrament meeting. “Remember” is the word. “Remember” is the program (8).

The root-word *remember* appears over 240 times in the Book of Mormon including expressions such as *remembrance* and *forget not*. That is almost once every other page. Viewing it as a *Leitwort*, *remember* could very well be the word that identifies and summarizes the vital message of the Book of Mormon. It certainly is frequently used in the book of Helaman.

Another example of a *Leitwort* in the book of Helaman is the word *pondering* in chapter 10:

And it came to pass that Nephi went his way towards his own house, *pondering* upon the things which the Lord had shown unto him. And it came to pass as he was thus *pondering*—being much cast down because of the wickedness of the people of the Nephites, their secret works of darkness, and their murderings, and their plunderings, and all manner of iniquities—and it came to pass as he was thus *pondering* in his heart, behold a voice came unto him saying. (vv 2–3; emphasis added)

The repetition of the word *pondering* in these two verses points out the importance of thinking deeply about Jesus Christ and listening to the quiet voice of the Lord.

Another example involves eight verses of scripture within Helaman chapter 11. They contain ten repetitions of the *Leitwörter O Lord*:

*O Lord*, do not suffer that this people shall be destroyed by the sword; but *O Lord*, rather let there be a famine in the land. . . . *O Lord*, behold this people repenteth. . . . Now, *O Lord*, because of this their humility wilt thou turn away thine anger. . . . *O Lord*, wilt thou turn away thine anger.

*O Lord*, wilt thou hearken unto me. *O Lord*, thou didst hearken unto my words. Yea, *O Lord* and thou seest that they have repented. . . . And now, *O Lord*, wilt thou turn away thine anger, and try again if they will serve thee? And if so, *O Lord*, thou canst bless them according to thy words which thou hast said. (v 4, 10–16; emphasis added)

Repetition of the phrase *O Lord* reminds the reader that Nephi is praying to the Lord, even pleading with him for his people. The importance and the greatness of God and his mercy are the theme of these verses. The idea that a prophet pleads for and prays on behalf of his people is also emphasized by the use of these *Leitwörter*.

Another example involves several *Leitwörter* spread through the whole of chapter 13 of the book of Helaman. Among the several *Leitwörter* repeated here are the following: *I, saith the Lord, a curse, riches, remember, and your destruction is made sure*. Samuel the Lamanite had received his message of the Lord from an angel:

Therefore, thus *saith the Lord*: Because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of the Nephites, except they repent *I* will take away my word from them, and *I* will withdraw my Spirit from them, and *I* will suffer them no longer, and *I* will turn the hearts of their brethren against them. And four hundred years shall not pass away before *I* will cause that they shall be smitten; yea, *I* will visit them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence. Yea, *I* will visit them in my fierce anger . . . *saith the Lord*. . . . But if ye will repent and return unto the Lord your God *I* will turn away mine anger, *saith the Lord*; yea, thus *saith the Lord* . . . yea, wo unto this great city of Zarahemla; for behold, it is because of those who are righteous that it is saved; yea wo unto this great city, for *I* perceive, *saith the Lord*,

that there are many . . . that will harden their hearts against me, *saith the Lord*. But blessed are they who will repent, for them will *I* spare. But behold, if it were not for the righteous who are in this great city, behold, *I* would cause that fire should come down out of heaven and destroy it. . . . But behold, the time cometh, *saith the Lord*. . . . And behold, a *curse* shall come upon the land, *saith the Lord*. . . . And it shall come to pass, *saith the Lord* . . . because of the great curse of the land. . . . For *I* will, *saith the Lord*. . . . *Cursed* be they who hide not up their treasures unto me. . . . *Cursed* is he because of the *curse* of the land. . . . Because they have set their hearts upon *riches*; and because they have set their hearts upon *riches* . . . *cursed* be they *saith the Lord*. . . . hearken unto the words which *the Lord* *saith*; for behold, he *saith* that ye are *cursed* because of your *riches*, and also are your *riches* *cursed* because ye have set your hearts upon them. . . . Ye do not *remember* the Lord your God in the things with which he hath blessed you, but ye do always *remember* your *riches* . . . for this cause hath the Lord God caused that a *curse* should come upon the land, and also upon your *riches*. . . . Behold, he hath *cursed* the land . . . and behold the time . . . cometh that he *curseth* your *riches* . . . and *your destruction is made sure* . . . *saith the Lord*. . . . O that we had *remembered* the Lord our God in the day that he gave us our *riches* . . . for behold, our *riches* are gone from us . . . because of the curse of the land. . . . For behold the land is *cursed* . . . *your destruction is made sure*. (emphasis added)

The *Leitworte* *I* and *saith the Lord* appear 25 times in this chapter. This emphasizes the theme of the power of God and Jesus Christ. The reader cannot miss the idea that this message was not Samuel the Lamanite's; it was the Lord's.

The other *Leitworte*, *a curse*, *riches*, and *your destruction is made sure*, are all related to each other. The reader is instructed that when people set their hearts on being rich, they will be *cursed*; and unless they repent and return unto Christ, their destruction is made sure. When the *Leitwort* *remember* is used again in Helaman 13:22, the reader is reminded of chapter 5 wherein Helaman wanted his sons to *remember* to keep the commandments of God, to *remember* Lehi and Nephi, their first parents, that they were good people and did good works, and to *remember* that Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which they should build. In chapter 13, Samuel the Lamanite tells the people:

Ye do not *remember* the Lord your God in the things with which he hath blessed you, but ye do always *remember* your riches, not to thank the Lord your God for them; yea your hearts are not drawn out unto the Lord, but they do swell with great pride, unto boasting, and unto great swelling, envyings, strifes, malice, persecutions, and murders, and all manner of iniquities. (v 22; emphasis added)

The result was that their destruction was made sure (vv 23–38). Certainly the *Leitwörter* found in Helaman 13, along with the messages that they accompany, ring loud and clear to us today. They focus our attention on Jesus Christ and emphasize the fact that we are to *remember* to keep the commandments of God, to *remember* to be good and do good works, and to *remember* that Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which we should build.

### Leitwörter in 3 Nephi

Similar to his editing in the book of Helaman, Mormon includes *Leitwörter* in 3 Nephi as well to guide his reader to his themes. He notes “that there was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions [that Christ would soon be born], should be put to death except the sign should come to pass, which had been given by Samuel the prophet” (1:9). Nephi, the son of Nephi, “bowed himself down upon the earth, and cried mightily to his God in behalf of his people” (v 11). It was the day before Christ would be born. Notice the *Leitwort I* again in verses 13 and 14 as the Lord talks to Nephi:

Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come *I* into the world, to show unto the world that *I* will fulfill all that which *I* have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. Behold, *I* come unto my own, to fulfill all things which *I* have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world. (emphasis added)

The effect of the pronoun *I* being used five times in these two verses is to focus the reader’s attention on Jesus Christ and his mission.

In 3 Nephi 9 the Leitwort *I* is also found used in much the same way. Note the similarity beginning with verse three:

Behold, that great city Zarahemla have *I* burned with fire. . . . And behold, that great city Moroni have *I* caused to be sunk in the depths of the sea . . . that great city Moronihah have *I* covered with earth . . . the city of Gilgal have *I* caused to be sunk . . . the city of Onihah . . . Mocom . . . Jerusalem. . . . And waters have *I* caused to come up in the stead thereof . . . the city of Gadiandi . . . Gadiomnah . . . Jacob . . . Gimginno, all these have *I* caused to be sunk . . . And the inhabitants thereof have *I* buried up in the depths of the earth . . . that great city Jacobugath . . . have *I* caused to be burned with fire . . . therefore *I* did cause them to be burned . . . the city of Laman . . . Josh . . . Gad . . . Kishkumen, have *I* caused to be burned with fire. . . . And stoning those whom *I* did send . . . there were none righteous among them, *I* did send down fire and destroy them . . . that the blood of the prophets and the saints whom *I* sent among them. . . . And many great destructions have *I* caused to come upon this land . . . be converted, that *I* may heal you. . . . Yea, verily *I* say unto you . . . whosoever will come, him will *I* receive. . . . Behold, *I* am Jesus Christ the Son of God. *I* created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. *I* was with the Father from the beginning. *I* am in the Father. . . . *I* came unto my own. . . . And as many as have received me, to them have *I* given to become the sons of God; and even so will *I* to as many as shall believe on my name. . . . *I* am the light and the life of the world. *I* am Alpha and Omega . . . yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for *I* will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings. . . . And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will *I* baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost. . . . Behold, *I* have come unto the world to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin. Therefore, whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will *I* receive for of such is the kingdom of God. Behold, for such *I* have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved. (emphasis added)

The first-person pronoun *I* is used 31 times in chapter 9. The effect for the reader is the same as it was in 3 Nephi 1 and Helaman 13. The repetition of *I* emphasizes the power of Jesus Christ, that he created the heavens and the earth and that he is in control of this earth. It also focuses the reader's attention on Jesus Christ.



## Conclusion

*Leitwort* as a literary device is used not only in the Ancient East, the Bible, and the Book of Mormon, but it is still used today. In the October 1988 General Conference, President Ezra Taft Benson repeatedly used two phrases that identified his theme and helped him convey his message of flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon:

*I challenge* the members of the church to participate in the family to family Book of Mormon Program. . . . *I challenge* our mission leaders to show their missionaries how to *challenge* their contacts to read the Book of Mormon and pray about it. . . . *I challenge* our church writers, teachers, and leaders to tell us more Book of Mormon conversion stories that will strengthen our faith and prepare great missionaries. *I challenge* those who are in business and other professions to see that there are copies of the Book of Mormon in their reception rooms. *I challenge* owners of cassette players to play Book of Mormon cassettes from time to time and to listen to them at home and while walking, jogging, or driving. *I challenge* the homes of Israel to display on their walls great quotations and scenes from the Book of Mormon. *I challenge* all of us to prayerfully consider steps that we can personally take to bring this new witness for Christ more fully into our own lives and into a world that so desperately needs it. *I have a vision* of homes alerted. . . . *I have a vision* of home teachers and visiting teachers. . . . *I have a vision* of artists putting into film. . . . *I have a vision* of thousands of missionaries going into the mission field. . . . *I have a vision* of the whole church getting nearer to God by abiding by the precepts of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, *I have a vision* of flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon (5–6; emphasis added).

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