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KnoWhy #352 - What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? - Part 2

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Abstract: Mosiah 3:18–19 is statistically one of its strongest chiasms, as well as one of the longest chiasms in King Benjamin’s speech, and is the center of the speech.

Alma 41:13–15 is an unusual example, in which Alma explained the principle of “restoration” in the next life by first laying out four paired terms which he then repeated in reverse order twice.

Helaman 6:7–13 is another one of the four statistically strongest chiasms in the Book of Mormon, and reports on an entire year of Nephite history.

Alma 29:1–7 uses the threefold repetition of an a-b-c pattern, creating a unique A-B-C-C-C-B-A outline for the overall structure, instead of the expected A-B-C-C-B-A structure, similar to chiasms found in Mesoamerica.



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What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 2

Editor's Note: This is part our on-going series on chiasmus, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of its discovery in the Book of Mormon. Be sure to check out our other KnoWhys on chiasmus and the Chiasmus Resources website for more information.

In the last fifty years, hundreds of chiasms have been proposed in the Book of Mormon.¹ As John W. Welch noted in 1995, there are “varying degrees of chiasticity,” and while “many proposed chiasms are impressive and interesting; others appear to be contrived or unremarkable.”² In other words, not all chiasms are created equal.

So to celebrate the discovery of chiasmus fifty years ago, we at Book of Mormon Central will present 10 of the most interesting chiasms in the Book of Mormon. Three were presented last week,³ and now we present four more. Each one is interesting for different reasons. Some are impressive for their display of artistry and creativity, others are important for the doctrinal truths they help to teach, clarify, or emphasize, while yet others are significant because of ancient Hebrew or Mayan connections.

Readers are invited to evaluate these chiasms themselves utilizing the criteria discussed previously.⁴

Mosiah 3:18–19

The Know

After first discovering chiasmus in Mosiah 5:10–12, John W. Welch turned back to the beginning of King Benjamin’s speech and then soon discovered a second example of chiasmus, in Mosiah 3:18–19.⁵ Like Mosiah 5:10–12, it is statistically one of the strongest chiasms in the Book of Mormon.⁶ It is also “one of the longest and most precise chiastic centerpieces in Benjamin’s speech,” and “occurs at the center of the central section of the whole speech,”⁷ which is itself arranged as a chiasm.⁸

The Why

The term *natural man* occurs nowhere else in all of the Book of Mormon, strengthening the likelihood that this chiasm is intentional.⁹ With this passage at the center, Benjamin’s “entire speech centers on a proclamation of the need for atonement/purification.”¹⁰ It “is clearly the turning point of a righteous relationship with God, the point of conversion, and the precondition of the covenant.”¹¹

Chiastic Structure of Mosiah 3:18–19

A men drink damnation to their own souls except they **humble** themselves

B and **become as little children**,

C and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through **the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent**.

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**

C and 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 which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

Alma 41:13–15

The Know

In this passage Alma pulled off “an unusual but extremely successful occurrence of chiasmus.”¹² Alma explained the principle of “restoration” in the next life by first laying out four paired terms which he then repeated in reverse order *twice*. As John W. Welch succinctly put it, “Alma writes a list of pairs and then a pair of lists.”¹³

paired with a condition to be met in the second occurrence of *good, righteous, just, and merciful*. This order is reversed in the list of pairs—the first list urges Corianton to be *merciful, just, righteous, and good*, while the second list promises that if he does these things, he will be rewarded with *mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness*. This both adds to the “chiasticity” of the passage, and adds impact to Alma’s teachings. John W. Welch marveled at this “great play on words.”¹⁴

The Why

In the list of pairs, the first occurrence of *good, righteous, just, and merciful* are each describing a reward which is

Chiastic Structure of Alma 41:13–15

A the meaning of the **word restoration** is to bring back again

B evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—

C a **good** for that which is **good**;

b **righteous** for that which is **righteous**;

c **just** for that which is **just**;

d **merciful** for that which is **merciful**.

C d Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren;

c deal **justly**,

b judge **righteously**,

a and do **good** continually;

and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward;

C d yea, ye shall have **mercy** restored unto you again;

c ye shall have **justice** restored unto you again;

b ye shall have a **righteous** judgment restored unto you again;

a 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.

Helaman 6:7–13

The Know

This passage is another one of the four statistically strongest chiasms in the Book of Mormon.¹⁵ This passage reports on the sixty-fourth year of the reign of judges, and the entirety of the year is summarized as a chiasm. Chiasmus was the perfect literary device to express this “unprecedented turning point in Nephite history” when there was extensive “prosperity, free travel, and peace between both the Nephites and Lamanites.”¹⁶

The Why

“Since this chiasm encompasses the entire report for the year,” it’s likely that it was “a single literary unit that Mormon found on the large plates of Nephi.”¹⁷ Thus, recognizing chiasmus here reveals an underlying source in Mormon’s abridgement. Most remarkable, the parallel terms in the center are *Lord* and *Zedekiah*. In Hebrew, *Zedekiah* includes the suffix *-yah*, an abbreviated form of *Yahweh* (Jehovah/Lord). Thus, “the central chiastic structure in Helaman 6:10 actually would have worked better and would have been more obvious in Hebrew . . . than in the English translation.”¹⁸

Chiastic Structure in Helaman 6:7–13

A And behold, there was **peace** in all the land,

B a insomuch that the **Nephites did go**
b into **whatsoever part** of the land **they would**,
c whether among the **Nephites or the Lamanites**.

a And it came to pass that the **Lamanites did also go**
b **whithersoever they would**,

c whether it were among the **Lamanites or among the Nephites**;
and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire.

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.

E a Now the **land south**

b was called **Lehi**,

c and the **land north**

d was called **Mulek**,

e which was after the son of **Zedekiah**

e for the **Lord**

E d did bring **Mulek**

c into the **land north**,

b and **Lehi**

a 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 a They did raise grain in **abundance**,
b both **in the north and in the south**;

a and they did **flourish exceedingly**,
b both **in the north and in the south**.

And they did multiply and wax exceedingly strong in the land. And they did raise many flocks and herds, yea, many fatlings. Behold their women did toil and spin, and did make all manner of cloth, of fine-twined linen and cloth of every kind, to clothe their nakedness.

A And thus the sixty and fourth year did pass away in **peace**.

Alma 29:1–7

The Know

Alma’s poetic reflections in Alma 29, likely coming on the cusp of a Jubilee year,¹⁹ are among some of the most parallel-laden passages in the entire Book of Mormon, including several examples of chiasmus.²⁰ In the center of the chiasmic structure of Alma 29:1–7 is the threefold repetition of an a-b-c pattern, creating a unique A-B-C-C-C-B-A outline for the overall structure, instead of the expected A-B-C-C-B-A structure. This double-layered repetition at the center strongly underscores the central message of this chiasmic passage: that if we seek unrighteous desires in this life, we will also reap the undesirable consequences.

Chiastic Structure of Alma 29:1–7

A O that **I were an angel**, and could have **the wish** of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a **voice to shake the earth**, and **cry** repentance **unto every people!** ... that there might not be more sorrow upon **all the face of the earth**.

B But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for **I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me**.

C a I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm **decree** of a just God, for I know that he **granteth unto men**

b according to **their desire**,
c **whether** it be unto death or unto life

C a yea, I know that he **allotteth unto men**, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are unalterable,

b according to **their wills**,
c **whether** they be unto salvation or unto destruction.

C a Yea, and I know that good and evil have come **before all men**;
he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil,

b to him it is given according to **his desires**
c **whether** he desireth good or evil,
life or death, joy or remorse of conscience.

B Now, seeing that I know these things, **why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?**

A Why should I **desire that I were an angel**, that I could **speak unto all the ends of the earth?**

The Why

Maya Linguists have identified a very similar chiasmic structure on Stela C at Quiriguá, which “talks about events that took place on the Creation date” and uses an A-B-C-C-C-B-A “chiasmic structure.”²¹ Furthermore, the three central elements (C lines) use three parallel statements in an a-b-c/a-b-c/a-c-b pattern, similar to the example in Alma 29. The only difference is that Stela C uses a change in sequence at the end to indicate the “peak event” or climax of the passage.²² The appearance of this unique chiasmic arrangement in both the Book of Mormon and Maya hieroglyphic texts is but one of many examples which illustrate how well the Book of Mormon fits within ancient “America’s earliest known literary tradition.”²³

Quiriguá Stela C

A 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ahau 8 Cumku, the Creation Event took place.

B **Three stones** were set:

C a The Paddler Gods **erected a stone**,

b in the First Five Sky **place**;
c it was the Jaguar **Throne Stone**.

C a The Black Deity **erected a stone**,

b in the Large Town **place**;
c it was the Snake **Throne Stone**.

C a And then it came to pass that Itzamna **set a stone**,

c the Water **Throne Stone**,
b in the Sky **place**.

B This was the First **Three Stones**

A 13 **Baktuns** were completed, under the supervision of the Six Sky Lord

Notes

1. “Chiasmus Index: Book of Mormon,” at *Chiasmus Resources*; Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007).
2. John W. Welch, “Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 14, 13, capitalization altered.
3. See Book of Mormon Central, “What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 1,” *KnoWhy* 349 (August 7, 2017).
4. See Book of Mormon Central, “What Counts as Chiasmus? (1 Nephi 19:7),” *KnoWhy* 337 (July 10, 2017).
5. John W. Welch, “The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 80.
6. Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 118–120.
7. 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), 348.
8. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 326–327, 350, 352, 373–376. See also John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, GER: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981; reprint Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999), 203.
9. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 352.
10. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon” (1981), 203.
11. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 376.
12. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, GER: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981; reprint Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999), 208.
13. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982; reprint FARMS, 1996), 49.
14. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon” (1982), 49.
15. Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 118–120. Due to the limitations of the statistical technique, only the core from Helaman 6:9–11 could be tested.
16. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 231–232; John W. Welch, “A Steady Stream of Significant Recognitions,” in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 346–347; Book of Mormon Central, “Why Was Chiasmus Used in Nephite Record Keeping? (Helaman 6:10),” *KnoWhy* 177 (August 31, 2016).
17. Welch, “A Steady Stream of Significant Recognitions,” 346; cf. Welch, “Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13,” 231, capitalization altered.
18. Welch, “A Steady Stream of Significant Recognitions,” 347; cf. Welch, “Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13,” 232.
19. Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Alma Wish to Speak ‘With the Trump of God’ (Alma 29:1)?” *KnoWhy* 136 (July 5, 2016).
20. In Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon*, (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 298–299 every verse fits into a parallel structure, with two overarching chiasms in vv. 1–7 and 8–17, and additional chiasms in vv. 9, 9–10, 14–16.
21. J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas A. Hopkins, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Workbook for a Short Course on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 2nd edition (Tallahassee, FL: Jaguar Tours, 2011), 18–21; Hutch Kinsman, “Grammar in the Script: Literary and Visual Devices in Grammatical Constructions,” *The Codex* 17, no. 3 (2009): 37–38.
22. Josserand and Hopkins, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 19; Kinsman, “Grammar in the Script,” 38.
23. Michael D. Carrasco and Kerry M. Hull, “Introduction,” in *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Maya Literature*, ed. Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2012), 1.