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## Teaching in Black and White: Antithetic Parallel Structure in the Book of Alma, Its Form and Function

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17

Donald W. Parry

The Book of Mormon prophets taught in black and white. “Gray” apparently was not an option with them. In turn, they did not want their audiences to respond in shades of gray. Their words were expressions of absoluteness and plainness. At the very beginning of Nephite history, Nephi said he gloried in teaching the message of Christ in plainness, as did Jacob (2 Nephi 25:7, 28; 31:2; 31:3; Jacob 2:11). Enos used “exceedingly great plainness of speech” to keep the stiffnecked people from “going down speedily to destruction” (Enos 1:23). King Benjamin told the assembled Saints, “I have spoken plainly unto you that ye might understand” (Mosiah 2:40).

The prophet Alma carried on this tradition of teaching in “plainness.” For instance, Alma delivered the “word of God unto the people, first in the land of Zarahemla, and from thence throughout all the land . . . [so] plainly that [they could] not err” (Alma 5:1, 43). On another occasion, he noted that “Amulek had spoken plainly” concerning death, the resurrection, and the day of judgment (Alma 12:12). Some groups in the land of Ammonihah were angry with Alma, “because of the plainness

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of his words” (Alma 14:2), and then they became angry with both Alma and Amulek “because they had testified so plainly against their wickedness” (Alma 14:3). Twice Alma noted that he spoke with such plainness that his audience could not err in understanding his meaning (Alma 5:43; 13:23; see also 2 Nephi 25:7, 30).

To achieve this ultimate degree of communication, Alma frequently used a highly significant literary technique, a figure of speech called antithetical parallelism, which presents the teaching in the plainest terms possible by contrasting it with an opposite. Use of this technique was first noticed in the Bible. Bishop Robert Lowth is credited with calling attention to the importance and prevalence of biblical parallelisms. Others have carried his work further noting that parallelism is “the basic feature of biblical songs—and, for that matter, of most the sayings, proverbs, laws, laments, blessings, curses, prayers, and speeches found in the Bible” (Kugel 1).

Antithetical parallelism is characterized by an opposition of thoughts, or an antithesis between two or more contiguous lines. This “antithesis is not in terms of contradiction, thesis and antithesis, but in opposite aspects of the same idea” (Krosovec 137). Antithetical parallelism may consist of two, four, or six lines. In the instance of a two line parallelism, line two corresponds in some manner, as an antonymous echo, or a symmetrical counterpart of line one. The corresponding lines may contain antonymous or repetitious elements. Likewise in the case of a four line antithetic structure, lines one and three correspond to some degree, as do lines two and four, and so on. A common but non-essential feature of antithetic parallelism is the article “but.” In a two line antithetical parallelism, the second line may be introduced with this disjunction, then immediately follows the contrasting element.

An example of antithetical verse recorded in Proverbs 13:9 will demonstrate the usage of the disjunction “but:”

*The light of the righteous rejoiceth;*

but the *lamp* of the *wicked* shall be put out.

The synonymous terms “light” and “lamp” are each followed respectively by the contrasted elements “righteous” and “wicked.” The two words “righteous” and “wicked” are not simple contradictions but opposite aspects of the same idea. The one is the antithesis of the other.

The antithetic parallelisms of the Book of Mormon, like their biblical counterparts, contain rich and varied antonyms. However, examples from the Book of Mormon appear in an extended form, usually having four or more lines. Furthermore, Book of Mormon antithetical units rarely utilize the disjunction “but.”

#### *Antithetical Parallelisms in Alma*

Of special interest to this chapter are antithetical units attested in the book of Alma. Alma, in his great discourse to the Saints of Zarahemla, utilized this poetic form in brief, yet conclusive words.

1 For I say unto you that whatsoever is *good*  
     2 cometh from *God*,  
 1 and whatsoever is *evil*  
     2 cometh from the *devil*. (Alma 5:40)

Note that I have underlined the antonymous terms that epitomize the perfect contrast, “good” and “evil,” and two beings that are considered opposite extremes on the scale of “good” and “evil,” God and the devil. God is good and the devil is evil. All good things originate from God, and Satan is the instigator of all things evil. Alma’s methods of contrast are written in the plainest of terms.

A longer example of antithetical parallelism immediately follows the verse just cited:

1 Therefore, if a man bringeth forth *good works*  
     2 he hearkeneth unto the voice of the *good*  
         *shepherd*,

3 and he *doth follow him*;  
1 but whosoever bringeth forth *evil works*  
2 the same becometh a child of the *devil*,  
for he hearkeneth unto his voice,  
3 and *doth follow him*. (Alma 5:41)

In this verse, one concept is opposed to the other “good works” versus “evil works,” the “good shepherd,” or Jesus Christ, versus the “devil.” The words are simple and easily understood.

Aaron, while in the land of Nephi presented the king of the land with the simple contrasts which make up the gospel plan. Quoting Ammon he states:

1 If ye will *repent*  
2 ye shall *be saved*,  
1 and if ye will *not repent*,  
2 ye shall *be cast off* at the last day. (Alma 22:6)

Here the contrast is apparent. The word “repent” stands in opposition to the words “not repent,” and the phrase “shall be saved” is the obverse side of “shall be cast off.”

Yet another example is found in Alma 36:4, with Alma speaking to his son Helaman.

And I would not that ye think that I know of myself—

1 not of the *temporal*  
2 but of the *spiritual*,  
1 not of the *carnal mind*  
2 but of *God*. (Alma 36:4)

This double antithetical parallelism demonstrates that the opposite of “temporal” is “spiritual,” and the idea of carnality and godliness are contrasting elements.

The following example of antithetic structure is well attested in the Book of Mormon. In the book of Alma alone this passage is found five times.

1 Inasmuch as ye shall *keep my commandments*,

2 ye shall *prosper* in the land.

1 And again, it is said that: Inasmuch as ye will *not*  
*keep my commandments*

2 ye shall be *cut off* from the presence of the Lord.  
(Alma 9:13; 36:30; 37:13; 38:1; 50:20)

Note the connection between keeping the commandments and prospering in the land (I believe it speaks of both temporal and spiritual prosperity), and the correspondence between disobedience and being “cut off” from God’s presence. The words are clear, the statements are expressed with simplicity, and the thesis and antithesis are portrayed with great plainness.

Here is a third example from the same speech:

1 I say unto you, can you *imagine to yourselves*

2 *that ye* hear the voice of *the Lord*,

3 *saying* unto you, in that day:

4 Come unto me ye blessed, for behold,  
your works have been the *works*  
*of righteousness*

5 upon the *face of the earth*?

1 Or do ye *imagine to yourselves*

2 *that ye* can lie unto *the Lord* in that day,

3 and *say*—

4 Lord, our works have been *righteous*  
*works*

5 upon the *face of the earth*—and that  
he will save you?

(Alma 5:16–17)

First note the repetitious aspects found in this construction. The expressions “imagine to yourselves,” “the Lord,” “works,” “face of the earth,” are each repeated twice. In the entire structure, two elements only represent the antithesis “ye hear” and “ye . . . lie,” as is shown in the two second lines. The first

deals with the ears, and perhaps denotes, as does the verb same verb in the Hebrew, to hear is to obey. When you hear the voice of the prophets, it is one and the same as if the Lord had spoken. Many hear the voice of the Lord through the prophets but they do not heed, rather they lie unto the Lord. This concept is similar to the expression found in Alma 10:6, “therefore I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know.”

Alma counseled his son Corianton, speaking to him about the works and deeds of mankind. Those whose works were good would enjoy “endless happiness” in the “kingdom of God.” Those whose works were evil would suffer “endless misery” and inherit the “kingdom of the devil.” Alma expressed this concept in a few words only. He stated that mankind would either be

- 1 raised to *endless happiness*,
- 2 to inherit the *kingdom of God*,
- 1 or to *endless misery*
- 2 to inherit the *kingdom of the devil*. (Alma 41:4)

Again, Alma’s words were plain, not to be misunderstood.

### *Function of Antithetic Parallelism*

We have briefly discussed the form of antithetical parallelism, now we will mention its function. The alert reader almost intuitively sees in antithetic parallelism a unique reciprocity between the two parts. Called a “paradoxical linguistic phenomenon” by Krasovec, the two reciprocal segments may initially puzzle the informed reader as the disjunctive nature of the verse is endowed with conjunctive qualities. Krasovec explains:

Antithetic structure displays . . . not only the unifying, the conjunctive principle of a given text, but has also an opposite function: disjunction, disconnection. In fact, antithesis is a paradoxical linguistic phenomenon, for antithetic structure of any kind conjoins the terms, sentences and larger units by disjoining the sense regarding the nature, quality, or action of persons or things. (88)

Thus antithetical parallelism contains not only a contrast between two ideas but also a connection between them. The meaning of the contrasted items clearly separate them, but the parallelism joins them so that they are considered together.

A second purpose of this poetic form is to allow or even force the reader to make a mental comparison, and often a choice, between two diametrically opposed but related ideas. For example, Alma positioned an extended antithetic parallelism in the midst of an instructive teaching moment directed toward his son Helaman:

Yea, I say unto you *my son*,  
2 that there could be *nothing so exquisite*  
3 and so bitter as were my *pains*.

1 Yea, and again I say unto you, *my son*, that on the  
other hand,  
2 there can be *nothing so exquisite*  
3 and sweet as was my *joy*. (Alma 36:21)

In lines one and four, Alma utilizes repetition by duplicating the expression “I say unto you my son.” Similarly, in lines two and five the phrase “nothing so exquisite” is found. The antithesis comes in lines three and six, where Alma contrasts the bitterness of his pains with the sweetness of his joy. Perhaps by his phrasing his experience in this instructive manner his son will mentally side with or feel an affinity with righteousness rather than evil. In such a teaching situation, antithetical parallelism has the ability to produce a positive emotional response in both the original audience (in this case Helaman) and subsequent readers, a response which in turn may cause the audience to repent and turn unto the Lord.

Antithetic has another notable effect upon the reader in the manner in which it presents opposites and contrasts a sharp resistance between persons, places, or things represented in the two lines. Comparisons between two terms has always been an accepted tool of rhetoricians employed for the purpose of



invoking an involvement with the reader. As Aristotle has written, “This kind of style is pleasing, because contraries are easily understood and even more so when placed side by side, and also because antithesis resembles a syllogism; for refutation is a bringing together of contraries.” (Aristotle, 3.9.7–10)

Yet another function of antithetical parallelism can be demonstrated that of repetitious clauses, or duplicated lines. Two kinds of repetition are found in the book of Alma, in connection with antithetical structure. First, the exact repetition of words or expressions. In the following verse Alma is quoting an unnamed angel.

**1 If they have been *righteous***  
**2 they shall reap the *salvation of their souls*,**  
**3 according to the power and *deliverance***  
**4 of *Jesus Christ*;**

**1 and if they have been *evil***  
**2 they shall reap the *damnation of their souls*,**  
**3 according to the power and *captivation***  
**4 of *the devil*.**

Again I have underlined the antonymous terms. Further, in the same example I have emboldened the words which are duplicated. Note the manner in which the angel employs repetition. The expressions “if they have been,” “they shall reap,” “of their souls,” “according to the power and” and “of,” are all duplicated. Out of 22 total words found in the first half of the verse, 16 are duplicated word for word in the second half of the verse. The remaining five words stand in antithesis to the underlined words of the second half of the verse. The words “righteous,” “salvation,” “deliverance,” and “Jesus Christ” are coterminous. They stand in direct contrast to the terms “evil,” “damnation,” “captivation,” and “devil.” Both clauses begin with “if” (protasis) and are immediately followed with the apodosis statement. The sides between good and evil are thus clearly drawn. The prophet has spoken in the plainest terms.

## Conclusion

The concept of antithetical parallelism is simple, beautiful, instructive, and the variations are endless. Such parallelisms can break up the monotony of the narrative and allowed inspired writers to compose scripture with greater expression.

The antithetical structure, which nearly dominates the Bible, is present in the Book of Mormon, particularly in the book of Alma. While it is not in the same exact form that is found in the Bible, it is used with a greater degree of simplicity and plainness. Because of the truths found in the Book of Mormon, and the manner in which they are presented, no one has need to “stumble” due to lack of understanding (1 Nephi 13:29). Both Nephi and Alma say they have spoken with such plainness that their audiences cannot err (2 Nephi 25:7, 30; Alma 5:43; 13:23). It is now up to the audience to heed the plainness of the prophets and to choose darkness or light, salvation or damnation, life or death. The plainest doctrines of the gospel are often presented in antithetical parallels.

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