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## A Masterpiece: Alma 36

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**Abstract:** Chiasmus is a style of writing known in antiquity and used by many ancient and some modern writers. It consists of arranging a series of words or ideas in one order, and then repeating it in reverse order. In the hands of a skillful writer, this literary form can serve several purposes. The repeating of key words in the two halves underlines the importance of the concepts they present. Furthermore, the main idea of the passage is placed at the turning point where the second half begins, which emphasizes it. The repeating form also enhances clarity and speeds memorizing. Readers (or listeners) gain a pleasing sense of completeness as the passage returns at the end to the idea that began it. Identifying the presence of chiasmus in a composition can reveal many complex and subtle features of the text.

## Chapter 11

# A MASTERPIECE: ALMA 36

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John W. Welch

**C**hiasmus is a style of writing known in antiquity and used by many ancient and some modern writers. It consists of arranging a series of words or ideas in one order, and then repeating it in reverse order. In the hands of a skillful writer, this literary form can serve several purposes. The repeating of key words in the two halves underlines the importance of the concepts they present. Furthermore, the main idea of the passage is placed at the turning point where the second half begins, which emphasizes it. The repeating form also enhances clarity and speeds memorizing. Readers (or listeners) gain a pleasing sense of completeness as the passage returns at the end to the idea that began it. Identifying the presence of chiasmus in a composition can reveal many complex and subtle features of the text.

As early as the first century B.C., Greek readers of Homer's *Odyssey* noted a fine example. In a conversation between Odysseus and his mother Anticleia in the underworld, Odysseus asks his mother's ghost:

- a How she had died,
- b Was it by a disease,
- c Or by the gentle shafts of Artemis.
- d About his father,
- e About his son Telemachus,
- f Whether another had assumed his royal power,
- g And about his wife, where does she stay.

Anticleia responds in exactly the reverse order:

g' She stays in thy halls,  
 f' No man has taken thy honor,  
 e' Telemachus is a peaceful lord,  
 d' Your father remains in the fields,  
 c' Artemis did not slay me,  
 b' Nor did a disease,  
 a' But I died of grief for thee.  
 (*Odyssey*, 11.170)

Many examples of chiasmus have been identified in the Hebrew Bible. A prime case is Leviticus 24:13–23. (Here and in other examples, I have added italics to emphasize correspondences.) Reporting the execution of a blasphemer, this text reads:

a And *the Lord spake unto Moses*, saying,  
 b Bring forth him that hath *curst without the camp*; and let all that heard him . . . *stone him*.  
 c And thou shalt *speak unto the children of Israel*, saying,  
 d Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin . . . : as well the *stranger*, 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 neighbour . . . , *so shall it be done to him*;  
 h breach for breach,  
 eye for eye,  
 tooth for tooth:  
 g' as he hath caused *a blemish* in a man, *so shall it be done to him* again.  
 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*, as for *one of your own country*. . . .  
 c' And *Moses spake to the children of Israel*,  
 b' that they should bring forth him that had *curst out of the camp*, and *stone him* with stones.  
 a' And the children of Israel did as *the Lord commanded Moses*.

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The symmetrical structure of this passage is obvious, long, and pleasing. It is unlikely that this elaborate, precise pattern was formed by accident.

Not all chiasms, however, are created equal. They differ in purpose, precision, and artistic achievement. Some are very clear; others are not. Some are very long; others are short. We must learn to look carefully to know whether a passage may be an actual chiasm and whether it is significant. After evaluating hundreds of proposed chiasms in a wide variety of lengthy texts, I have found that only a few texts unmistakably rate as planned, successful chiasms. Alma 36 is one of the best.

Alma 36 was one of the first chiasms I discovered within the Book of Mormon in 1967. Many years later, it still remains one of my favorites. It is a masterpiece of composition, as good as any other use of chiasmus in world literature, and it deserves wide recognition and appreciation. I cannot imagine that its complex and purposeful structure happened unintentionally. Its sophistication as a piece of literature definitely shows Alma's skill as a writer.

Here, we are going to look at the overall structure of Alma 36 and then analyze many of its details. It will quickly become evident that this text shows a very high degree of chiasm at several levels of complexity.

### **Level 1: The Overall Structure of Alma 36**

We begin by finding the main girders in its structure or framework. The following summary of the chapter, in which Alma tells his son Helaman about his dramatic conversion, shows the basic elements. There are seventeen key elements, each repeated twice (verse numbers are indicated in parentheses):

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

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The design of this text is amazing. I am especially impressed with the repetition of the name “Jesus Christ, Son of God” at the very center of the chapter. This unquestionably had deep significance for Alma. It is one of the best examples of any ancient author succeeding in placing the most important concept at the central or turning point of his passage. By this, the structure of the chapter powerfully communicates Alma’s personal experience, for the central turning point of his conversion came precisely when he called upon the name of Jesus Christ and asked for mercy. Nothing was more important than this in Alma’s conversion—neither the appearance of the angel, nor the prayers of his father and the priests. Just as this was the turning point of Alma’s life, he makes it the center of this magnificent composition.

### **Level 2: The Full Text of Alma 36**

We have seen the main girders of the structure. Now, at a more detailed level, we are able to detect panels of text filling in the gaps. There is no simple way to display these segments except to set forth every word in the chapter. The following arrangement is largely self-explanatory. I have grouped the text into segments, each having corresponding counterparts in the two halves.

I encourage readers to take time to read the text several times. The lettering of key parts (A, B, C, etc.) is the same as in the preceding discussion (Level 1). Lowercase a, b, c, etc., indicate matching phrases within shorter sections. As will be discussed below, some of these words serve in more than one way. Sometimes the repeated (italicized) phrases function in the overall structure of the chapter, sometimes they stand within substructures or single sections. At other times they bridge from one section to the next. All these elements work together in masterful harmony to create a composition that flows smoothly from one part to the next. The movement of concepts and phrasings from one section to another is never awkward or abrupt.

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- verse*
- A    *My son, give ear to my words;* [1]
- B    for I swear unto you *that*  
*inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God*  
*ye shall prosper in the land.*
- C    I would that ye should do *as I have done,* [2]  
*in remembering the captivity of our fathers;*
- D    a    for they were *in bondage,*  
      b    and none could *deliver them*  
      c    except it was the God of Abraham,  
      c    and the God of Isaac,  
      c    and the God of Jacob;  
      b'    and he surely did *deliver them*  
      a'    in their *afflictions.*
- A    And now, O *my son Helaman,* behold, thou art in [3]  
      thy youth,  
      and therefore, I beseech of thee that  
      thou wilt *hear my words* and learn of me;
- E    for I do know that whosoever shall put their *trust in God*  
      shall be *supported* in their *trials,*  
      and their *troubles,*  
      and their *afflictions,*  
  
      and shall be *lifted up at the last day.*
- F    And I would not that ye think that I *know of myself—* [4]  
      a    not of the temporal  
      b    but of the spiritual,  
      a'    not of the carnal mind  
      b'    but *of God.*
- G    Now, behold, I say unto you, [5]  
      if I had not been *born of God*  
      I should not have known these things;  
      but God has, by the mouth of his holy angel,  
      made these things known *unto me,*  
      not of any worthiness *of myself;*

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- verse*
- H** For I went about with the sons of Mosiah, [6]  
*seeking to destroy the church of God;*  
but behold, God sent his holy angel to stop us by the way.  
And behold, he *spake unto us*, as it were the [7]  
voice of thunder,  
and the whole *earth* did tremble beneath our *feet*;  
and we all *fell to the earth*,  
for the *fear* of the Lord came upon us.
- But behold, the voice said unto me: Arise. [8]  
And I arose and *stood up*, and beheld the angel.  
And he said unto me: [9]  
If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed,  
*seek no more to destroy the church of God.*  
And it came to pass that I *fell to the earth*; [10]  
and it was for the space of three days and three nights  
that I could not open my mouth,  
neither had I the use of *my limbs*.
- And the angel *spake* more things *unto me*, [11]  
which were heard by my brethren, but I did not hear them;  
for when I heard the words—  
If thou wilt be destroyed of thyself,  
*seek no more to destroy the church of God—*  
I was struck with such great *fear* and amazement  
lest perhaps I should be destroyed,  
that I *fell to the earth* and I did hear no more.
- I** But I was *racked* with eternal torment, [12]  
for my soul was *harrowed up* to the greatest degree and  
*racked with all my sins*.
- Yea, I did remember *all my sins* and *iniquities*, [13]  
for which I was *tormented* with the *pains of hell*;  
Yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God,  
and that I had not kept his holy commandments.
- Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, [14]  
or rather led them away unto destruction;



*verse*

Yea, and in fine so great had been my *iniquities*,  
that the very thought of coming into *the presence of my God*  
did *rack* my soul with inexpressible horror.

Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become [15]  
extinct  
both soul and body,

That I might not be brought to stand in *the presence of my*  
*God*,  
to be judged of my deeds.

And now, for three days and for three nights was [16]  
*I racked*,  
even with the *pains* of a damned soul.

J And it came to pass that as I was thus *racked* with [17]  
*torment*,  
while I was *harrowed up by the memory of my many sins*,

K behold, I *remembered* also to have heard my father prophesy  
unto the people concerning the coming of one  
*Jesus Christ, a Son of God*,  
to atone for the sins of the world.

K' Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, [18]  
I cried within my heart:  
*O Jesus, thou Son of God*,  
have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness,  
and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

J' And now, behold, when I thought this, I could [19]  
*remember my pains no more*;  
yea, I was *harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more*.

I' And oh, what *joy*, and what marvelous light I did [20]  
behold;  
yea, my soul was filled with *joy* as exceeding as was my  
*pain!*

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verse

- a Yea, I say unto you, my son, [21]  
b that there could be *nothing so exquisite* and so bitter  
c as were *my pains*.  
a' Yea, and again I say unto you, my son,  
b' that on the other hand, there can be *nothing so*  
*exquisite* and sweet  
c' as was *my joy*.

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, [22]  
"God sitting upon his throne,  
surrounded with numberless concourses of angels,  
in the attitude of singing and praising their God;"  
yea, and my soul did long to be there.

- H' But behold, *my limbs* did receive their strength again, [23]  
and I *stood* upon my *feet*,  
and did manifest unto the people  
that I had been *born of God*.

Yea, and from that time even until now, [24]  
I have labored without ceasing,  
that I might bring souls unto repentance;

- G' that I might bring them to taste of the *exceeding joy*  
of which I did *taste*;  
that they might also be *born of God*,  
and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Yea, and now behold, *O my son*, [25]  
the Lord doth give me *exceedingly great joy*  
in the fruit of my labors;

For because of the word which he has imparted [26]  
*unto me*,  
behold, many have been *born of God*,

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- F' and have *tasted*  
as I have *tasted*,  
and have *seen* eye to eye  
as I have *seen*;  
therefore they do *know* of these things of which I have  
spoken,  
as I do *know*;  
and the *knowledge* which I have is of *God*.
- E' And I have been *supported* [27]  
under *trials*  
and *troubles* of every kind,  
yea, and in all manner of *afflictions*;  
yea, God has *delivered* me  
from prison,  
and from bonds,  
and from death;  
Yea, and I do put my *trust* in *him*,  
and he will still *deliver* me.  
And I know that he *will raise me up at the last day*, [28]  
to dwell with him in glory.
- D' Yea, and I will praise him *forever*,  
for he has *brought our fathers* out of *Egypt*,  
and he has swallowed up the *Egyptians* in the Red Sea;  
a and he led them by his *power* into the promised *land*;  
b yea, and he has *delivered them* out of *bondage* and  
*captivity*  
c *from time to time*;  
a' yea, and he has also *brought our fathers* [29]  
out of the *land* of *Jerusalem*;  
b' and he has also by his everlasting *power*, *delivered*  
*them* out of *bondage* and *captivity*,  
c' *from time to time* even down to the *present day*;

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verse

- C' And I have always retained *in remembrance their captivity*;  
yea, and ye also ought to retain *in remembrance, as I have  
done, their captivity.*
- B' But behold, *my son*, this is not all; [30]  
a for ye *ought to know as I do know*,  
b *that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God*  
c *ye shall prosper in the land*;  
a' and ye *ought to know* also,  
b' that inasmuch as ye will not *keep the commandments  
of God*  
c' ye shall be cut off from his presence.
- A' Now this is according to his *word*.

### Level 3: Detailed Relations between the Paired Sections

The impressive overall structure of the full text of this complex passage becomes even more evident as pairs of sections are examined. Refer back to the full text to see the following detailed relationships:

Sections A and A' introduce and conclude the chapter by referring to Alma's "words" and the "word" of God.

Sections B and B' both state that prosperity comes from keeping the commandments of God. B states the principle once; B' repeats it twice, once positively and once negatively.

Sections C and C' exhort Helaman to remember, as Alma has done, the captivity of the fathers. C says that Helaman should do as Alma has done; on the other hand, C' states what Alma has done, and then moves, in the opposite order, to the obligation this imposes upon Helaman.

Sections D and D' both speak of bondage and deliverance. Section D itself is a small chiasm, composed of the following elements:

- a for they were *in bondage*,
- b and none could *deliver them*
- c except it was the God of Abraham,
- c and the God of Isaac,
- c and the God of Jacob;
- b' and he surely did *deliver them*
- a' *in their afflictions*.

The expression “did deliver them *in their afflictions*” (instead of *from their afflictions*) seems odd, except when it is understood as a chiastic link to the phrase “*in bondage*.” At the center of D is the triplet, “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” while D' speaks of three deliverances of the fathers by God—from Egypt, of the Israelites in the land of promise, and of Lehi and his descendants from time to time. D' also contains several interesting pairings: two references to “Egypt,” two uses of the phrase “brought our fathers out,” two occurrences of the phrase “delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time,” and a minor chiasm in the two phrases “by his *power* into the promised *land*” and “the *land* of Jerusalem by his everlasting *power*.”

E and E' are both marked by the triplet, “supported under trials, troubles, and afflictions.” In E' the third member of this triplet is stressed, “yea, and in all manner of afflictions,” to make the repetition clear. Both E and E' speak of putting one's “trust in God” and of being “lifted up at the last day.” In E, the idea of trusting in God is presented as it applies collectively to all people; in E' the point is personalized, telling how Alma had been individually supported and thus had personally trusted in God to be raised up at the last day. The triplet “trials, troubles, and afflictions” appears at the center of E. A new triplet (“prison, bonds, death”), speaking of Alma's personal deliverance while at Ammonihah (Alma 14), stands at the center of E', flanked by words drawn from E.

F and F' both affirm that Alma speaks of his own knowledge. In F, Alma first asserts that he personally does not know “of himself,” but only knows “of God.” F' extends this theme col-

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lectively to Alma's converts, that they also know as he knows. This sequence from the personal to the collective reverses the sequence from the collective to the personal that was found in E and E'.

The clear theme in both G and G' is being "born of God." The phrase appears once in G and emphatically twice in G'. The "mouth" of God's angel is mentioned in G, and the "taste" of Alma's exceeding joy is doubled in G'.

H and H' speak of the contrast between Alma's persecution of the church and being stricken by the angel of the Lord on the one hand, and his recovery and work to bring souls to repentance on the other hand. Both sections speak of "limbs," "feet," "earth," and of falling down or standing up. H itself is an interesting composition. Three times it intones the phrase "seek no more to destroy the church of God," which is the language of the angel. This three-fold repetition has a powerful dramatic effect.

I and I' contrast the agony of Alma's suffering (in I) with the joy of his conversion (in I'). Indeed, the contrast is made explicit in I': "Yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain" (Alma 36:20). This statement strongly supports the idea that Alma consciously created the chiastic structure of this chapter. (Faint traces of an original eight-part poem seem to be found in section I.)

Another remarkable thing about Alma 36:22 is the fact that Lehi's words are not just summarized, but are precisely quoted. These twenty-one words are a verbatim quote of 1 Nephi 1:8. Such exactness cannot be explained by thinking that Joseph turned to 1 Nephi and copied the words of Lehi from what Oliver Cowdery had already recorded from Joseph's dictation, for 1 Nephi may not yet even have been translated at the time when Joseph and Oliver were translating Alma 36.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, Alma was very meticulous in quoting Lehi's words from the small plates of Nephi when he composed Alma 36, and Joseph Smith's dictated translation preserved that exactitude.

The paired sections J and J' are distinguished by their unique

use of the nearly identical phrases “harrowed up by the memory of my many sins,” and “harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.”

Sections K and K' stand at the center of the composition, naming “Jesus Christ, a son of God,” and “Jesus, thou son of God.” Only when Alma remembered that his father had spoken of the atonement of Christ and then called upon Jesus Christ did his tormented condition change. At the absolute center stand the words “atone,” “mind,” and “heart,” bordered by the name of Jesus Christ. The message is clear: Christ’s atonement and man’s responding sacrifice of a broken heart and willing mind are central to receiving forgiveness from God.

#### **Level 4: Weaving Factors**

In addition to the close relationships that exist between each pair of sections, the fact that each segment flows smoothly into the next adds another dimension to the textual complexity of this chapter. No awkwardness, no sharp breaks are found here. Bridges connect each section to the one that follows it. These linkages are accomplished largely by introducing a minor item in one section that anticipates ideas in the next.

For example, the phrase “my words” at the end of A blends into the beginning of B, “for I swear.”

“Captivity” at the end of C blends directly into “bondage” at the beginning of D.

“Afflictions” at the end of D, from which the fathers were delivered, later appears more significantly at the center of E, promising further support and salvation.

The introductory phrase “for I do know” in E anticipates all of Alma’s knowledge in F, and F ends with the words “of God,” which is where G begins, being born “of God.”

G ends with Alma acknowledging his unworthiness, which leads naturally into H, the section where he tells about Alma’s wickedness in “seeking to destroy the church of God.”

H first introduces the ideas of “fear” and being “destroyed,” which intensify in I as “torment” and “inexpressible horror.”

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J starts with a single use of a key word that was mentioned four times in I, "racked." The memory of "sins" in J and J' surround the centrally stated purpose of Christ's coming, "to atone for the *sins* of the world."

Moving from the center now back out to the end, similarly subtle steps of transition and weaving again occur. J' states twice that Alma remembered his pains "no more," and this leads directly to the contrast between the former pain and the joy that replaced that agony in I'.

Alma's longing to go into the presence of God at the end of I' evokes the idea of physical movement, which flows into H' as Alma's limbs recover their strength.

H' ends with the phrase "that I might bring," and G' begins with the same phrase "that I might bring."

The idea of Alma's joy in I' looks forward to the joy of Alma's converts two segments later in G'; the joy in I' is called "exquisite," whereas in G' it is both times called "exceeding."

As G' ("taste," "born of God") blends into F', the phrases "as I have tasted" and "as I have seen" grow into the phrase "as I do know," so that by the end F' returns to the theme of F, namely the divine source of Alma's knowledge.

E' ends with a unique phrase "to dwell with him in glory," which seems to have been introduced as a transition to D', which begins with the idea of "praising" (glorifying) God forever. Alma will praise God forever because of his deliverance from bondage and captivity, which is the theme taken up in C' in remembering the captivity of the fathers.

C' ends with the exhortation "ye also ought to," a connecting phrase that is repeated twice in B'.

These weaving links are subtle but effective. They make the transitions from section to section smooth and flowing. This reflects a highly polished literary product. If an author uses chiasmus mechanically, it can produce rigid, stilted writing (a poor result from an author misusing or poorly implementing any artistic device). Alma, however, does not simply stick a list of ideas together in one order and then awkwardly and slavishly



retrace his steps through that list in the opposite order. His work has the markings of a skillful, painstaking writer, one completely comfortable with using this difficult mode of expression well.

### **Level 5: Degree of Chiasticity**

We now are in a position to see how complex the chiasm of Alma 36 really is. Chiasmus can occur in any literature, but it only becomes meaningful when its degree of chiasticity is high. Only when the chiastic format is truly complex and concise are we justified in supposing that the author intentionally followed the pattern. Judged by the following criteria, 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.

*Objectivity.* The chiastic pattern of Alma 36 is objectively verifiable. It is not based on loose connections, imaginative synonyms, or conceptual relationships. Few texts contain such overt evidence as this.

*Purpose, climax, and centrality.* Chiasmus is an excellent literary device to convey the sense of conversion. The turning point of Alma's chapter communicates both in form and substance the turning point of Alma's life. Thus, the placement of the name of Jesus Christ at the center of Alma 36 is highly purposeful. The central elements of this passage are its focus.

*Boundaries.* Chiasm is strongest if it operates upon a whole literary unit. Alma 36 is a literary unit.

*Length.* The longer and clearer the chiasm, the higher its degree of chiasticity. Alma 36 is among the longest clear chiasms found anywhere.

*Density and dominance.* Alma 36 contains 1230 total words. Around 175 figure directly in the chiasm. And these 175 are substantial, not minor, words in the text.

*Mavericks and random repetition.* A chiasm is less convincing if important words in the structure appear elsewhere in the text outside the suggested arrangement. Alma 36 meets this rule very well. For example, of the thirty key structural words, only three

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("word," "commandments," and "know") ever appear outside their respective sections. There is very little random repetition of these thirty key words or of any other words in Alma 36.

*Balance.* Alma 36 exhibits a strong degree of balance. The first half of the structure contains 52.4% of the words, and the second half, 47.6%. Even minor words like "behold" (six times in each half) and "my" (eighteen times in the first half and seventeen in the second) occur equally in the two halves.

*Return.* Alma 36 conveys a powerful sense of completeness. It clearly returns to the ideas with which it began.

*Stylistic Compatibility.* Alma wrote other passages that are strongly chiasmic. For example, there is Alma 41:13–15, which was apparently given by Alma to Corianton on the same day he gave Alma 36 to Helaman. Obviously chiasmus was distinctly part of Alma's literary style and not a one-time fluke.

*Aesthetics.* Alma 36 is fluent and harmonious. Chiasmus is a rather rigid pattern, yet here it does not draw undue attention to itself, and it does not detract from the warmth we would expect in such a personal account.

*Setting.* Perhaps Alma gave Helaman a kind of double blessing such as was customary for Israelites to give their firstborn son (see Deuteronomy 21:17). At least this blessing was double-structured. In contrast, Alma's blessing to his second son, Shiblon (in Alma 38), consists of only the first half of Helaman's blessing. This is not likely to have occurred by chance.

*Intentionality.* Short of an actual statement by Alma certifying that he used this pattern on purpose, it is difficult to imagine a clearer case than Alma 36. This conclusion is further supported by comparing Alma 36 with Mosiah 27 and Alma 38.

### **Level 6: Comparison of Mosiah 27 and Alma 36**

Mosiah 27:10–32 gives an account of the actual, spontaneous words that Alma used when he spoke to the people right after his conversion. That was the original statement of what Alma retells in Alma 36. Twenty or so years separated the events of Mosiah 27 and Alma 36; still it is obvious that the same person

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made both statements. For instance, certain distinctive phrases in Mosiah 27 reappear in Alma 36, such as “destroy the church of God,” “with the sons of Mosiah seeking to destroy the church,” “lead astray,” “rebellious against God,” “he spake as it were with a voice of thunder,” “earth to shake upon which they stood,” “fell to the earth,” and so on through several more. So the story as reported in Mosiah 27 has close verbal connections with Alma 36, even though one hundred pages of text separate the two versions.

In terms of form, however, the two accounts are quite different. The sentences in Mosiah 27 are short, contrasting statements, such as, “I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the marvelous light of God” (v. 29). 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.

Anyone who claims that a passage is chiasmic should be able to prove it. In my opinion, the case with respect to Alma 36 is established. It fits all the rules, from the objective to the aesthetic. This text ranks as one of the best uses of chiasmus one can imagine. It merits high acclaim and recognition. Despite its complexity, the meaning of the chapter is both simple and profound. Alma’s words are both inspired and inspiring, religious and literary, historical and timeless, clear yet complex—a text that deserves to be pondered for years to come.

### *Notes*

1. See “How Long Did It Take Joseph Smith to Translate the Book of Mormon?” *Ensign*, January 1988, pp. 46–47.