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CHAPTER 8

WHAT DOES CHIASMUS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON PROVE?

John W. Welch

Assuming that a text manifests a high degree of chiasmaticity by solidly satisfying objective criteria that are generally agreed upon as the factors that are present in a clearly chiasmatic passage, what does the presence of this literary pattern in that text prove? Of what is it evidence? As I hope to show in the following discussion, the existence of chiasmus in a text proves many things. For purposes of this discussion, I assume that readers are generally familiar with the concept of chiasmus; chiasmus was first introduced into Book of Mormon studies in 1969 by my article, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,"¹ which conveniently displays several examples of this inverted parallel pattern of writing found in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. I also assume that serious students will concern themselves methodologically with the task of defining specific criteria by which one may identify the presence of chiasmus² and will engage

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themselves epistemologically with the requirements of understanding the process of evaluating and using evidence in general in the nurturing of faith.³ From those points of departure, the present discussion can focus specifically on the question, What does chiasmus in the Book of Mormon prove?

Rarely in Book of Mormon studies has a concept captured the imagination and fascination of scholars and readers more than has the presence of chiasmus in that book. The basic concept of chiasmus is readily grasped, and in certain texts its presence can be easily and obviously demonstrated. Novice readers may spot the clear and simple examples of chiasmus without difficulty, although puzzling over the task of unraveling, digesting, and displaying the more complex and sometimes nebulous examples of chiasmus challenges even the most sophisticated literary analysts. Many people, in studying both the Bible and the Book of Mormon, have found the search for chiasms to be almost irresistible. Some people are intrinsically fascinated by the form and are propelled by the prospects of discovering some new aspect of their text, of uncovering some new insight into its meaning, or of adding some new level of appreciation for the possible organizing structures that lie embedded behind the words of its passages. Some people, of course, have gone overboard with this search, and caution must be employed; otherwise, it is possible to find chiasmus in the telephone book, and the effort becomes meaningless. But when rigorous criteria are applied and ideological agendas are not allowed to drive analysts to propose tenuous linkages purporting to evince chiasmic elements within the text itself, the pursuit can be very meaningful, conceptually defensible, and academically rewarding.

General Effects

Many people have been impressed by the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. Most of these people do not articulate specifically what it is about chiasmus that attracts them. But in general, it appears that they are impressed by the fact that there is more in the Book of Mormon than meets the eye. Several people who had been inclined initially to discount the book as superficial or insubstantial have felt required, when confronted by the presence of chiasmus in that volume, to back up a few steps and think more deeply about the book, its origins, and its messages.

The presence of chiasmus gives a general sense of satisfaction to the reader, who may feel that the text is now more understandable, more beautiful, and more meaningful than had been previously supposed. As an interpretive tool, chiastic analysis opens up to the reader a clear picture of at least one distinctive reading of the text. Words that might have previously seemed insignificant or unconnected take on new significance when they are seen to play a role in a finely organized literary configuration. Attention to detail, on both micro and macro levels, enhances the likelihood that meanings that are grounded in the text itself will emerge in the eyes of beholders.

These overall effects are further heightened by a sense of attaining esoteric knowledge. The average reader is completely oblivious to the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. Only those who understand the concept of chiasmus and have seen a few examples of this style of writing in the book are aware of its presence. This special knowledge tends to enhance the reader's personal relationship with the text. It makes the reader feel that the book belongs to him or her in a more personal or intimate way. This is

especially true if the reader has discovered a chiastic structure in a text on his or her own. Even if the example is not a very good one, a personally discovered chiasm tends to become a treasured piece of knowledge that the reader will continue to enjoy even if the example is not clear enough to convince anyone else that the passage should be called chiastic.

A general sense of fascination with exploration and discovery impels some readers to try to determine how many passages in the Book of Mormon or elsewhere may be chiastic. For some people, this search becomes something like a hunt for hidden treasure. One must be careful in this quest, however, to avoid the problems of the “hammer syndrome”—to the person holding a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To the person who knows only chiasmus and no other form of literary composition, everything may start looking like a chiasm. Fool’s gold glitters, but it is not a treasure. Accordingly, discriminating readers will use a wide variety of literary tools in their analyses and will try to use the tool most fitting to the needs and characteristics of the text being scrutinized.

General Variables

Beyond these general effects of chiasmus on readers, it is possible to be more specific about the evidentiary value of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. Because chiasmus is a complex phenomenon—in some ways objective and in other ways subjective—what is proved by chiasmus cannot be described simplistically.

Chiasmus proves many different things because the many instances of chiasmus are themselves varied. Chiasms come in different sizes and shapes. No two chiasms are created equally. Some may consist of only four words in an a-b-b-a

pattern, while others may extend throughout entire chapters or even books. The shorter patterns are rather common and relatively unremarkable, generally proving little. They may appear in many languages and literatures. Short, simple chiasms have a quality about them that conveys a sense of completeness or cleverness, such as the “first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30; cf. Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30; 1 Nephi 13:42; Ether 13:12; and D&C 29:30), or “he who fails to prepare, prepares to fail.” As these patterns become more extensive, however, their potential evidentiary value also increases. But the degree of certainty about the objectivity of a chiastic pattern may equally diminish as the length and looseness of the proposed unit increases. Instances of chiasmus also vary in terms of their degree of precision and clarity. It bears repeating that “if any aspect of chiastic analysis is to produce rigorous and verifiable results, the inverted parallel orders, which create the chiasms on which that analysis is based, must be evidenced in the text itself and not imposed upon the text by Procrustean design or artifice of the reader.”⁴ Thus, the degree to which chiasmus serves as evidence of anything specific also depends directly upon the degree to which the passage satisfies objective criteria for being called chiastic. With these general variables in mind, chiasmus offers descriptive and implicit information about the texts of the Book of Mormon that leads to several reliable conclusions.

Evidence about the Qualities of the English Text

The presence of chiasmus in a Book of Mormon text reveals several things about the English text itself. The following paragraphs examine some of the facets of a text revealed by the presence of chiasmus.

An Orderly Text

Chiastic analysis displays the orderliness of the text, proving that the text is not chaotic, random, or devoid of form. While it is possible for some orders to occur accidentally (as chaos theory so elegantly makes manifest), most instances of order—especially when these patterns occur repeatedly under similar circumstances consistently manifesting distinctive and seemingly intentional characteristics—do not appear to be attributable to random phenomena. To the extent that specific order within a text appears to be consciously created, this serves as evidence that an author intentionally composed the text with that principle of order in mind.

The structure of Alma 36 is one such case. It manifests a high degree of distinctive, objective, extensive, purposeful, and impressive organizational features, which, especially when taken all together, make it difficult to believe that the chapter got that way simply by happenstance.⁵ It features seventeen elements that appear in one order in the first half of the chapter and then reappear in the opposite order in the second half. The case for organizational intentionality in Alma 36 is significantly strengthened when one then couples an analysis of its words and phrases with the direct parallelisms of Mosiah 27; furthermore, in light of the companion half-structure of Alma 38, the double structure of Alma 36 rises to a high level of evidence proving the orderly nature of that text.⁶

A Complex Text

In addition, the presence of chiasmus demonstrates that a text is relatively complex. Some readers form an opinion about a book, that it is either simple or profound. Some readers value simplicity, and in some ways the Gospel of John

and the Book of Mormon are relatively simple in their straightforward use of language and relatively uncomplicated syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. In many respects, great beauty resides in simplicity and clarity. But in other respects, some readers may discount a simple text, thinking that it is naive or unsophisticated and therefore not deserving of serious attention or contemplation. The presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon shows its texts to be more complicated than a superficial judgment might indicate, for whatever such evidence may be worth.

Textual Units

Furthermore, the presence of chiasmus can help one identify textual units within the text. Chiasmus is evidence that some of the text was composed in idea units, although one may not always be sure when or why or by whom the archaic units were created. Knowing that the Book of Mormon text was compiled out of older units may keep readers alert to its pattern of thought as well as to its history. Whenever one reads a text, especially a text with ancient origins, one ought to be mindful of the text's division into segments or units, and that "chiasmus afforded a seriously needed element of internal organization in ancient writing, which of course did not make use of paragraphs, punctuation, capitalization and other synthetic devices to communicate the conclusion of one idea and the commencement of the next."⁷ For these and many other reasons, readers may seek evidence of the presence and significance of unit organization and substructure within the text.

Aesthetic Qualities

Moreover, the presence of chiasmus may prove that the text is artistically pleasing. Chiastic analysis may enhance

one's appreciation for the beauty and aesthetic value of the text. In judging the literary achievement of a body of literature, it is important to understand the guiding principles that directed the mind and words of the author. The Homeric epics, for example, were written in dactylic hexameter, and thus it would be inappropriate to judge the poetic achievement of these poems against modern poetical criteria and standards.

More often in other cultures than in cultures using modern English, literary beauty was synonymous with form. Becoming so fluent in the use of a form that the form itself becomes almost invisible, or at least does not draw undue attention to itself, is the mark of a great artist. The presence of chiasmus in the English text of the Book of Mormon supplies significant evidence that the book is more beautiful than people had previously thought: "The form [of chiasmus] can be aesthetically very pleasing, due in part to its vast potential to coordinate rigorous and abrupt juxtapositions within a single unified literary system, all while focusing on a point of central concern."⁸ After Professor David Noel Freedman and I had read through Alma 36 together with chiasmus in mind, he remarked to me, "Mormons are very lucky. Their book is very beautiful." Others have responded similarly.

Evidence of Content and Meaning

Next, the presence of chiasmus may be evidence of the content and meaning of a passage. Form is often linked with content.

In Mosiah 5:10–12, for example, King Benjamin is interested in contrasting those who remember the covenantal name with those who do not, or contrasting those who know the voice by which they will be called with those who must be called by some other name. The structure of the chiasm in this text accentuates this sharp contrast, the ei-

ther/or separating these two options (the basic inverted sequence is *name, called, left hand, remember, blotted out, transgression, transgress, blotted out, remember, left hand, called, name*). This formal structure also places at the center the divinely decreed consequence, namely, the blotting out of their names in the event of transgression, which the covenants are therefore sternly admonished to avoid.

Alma 41:13–15 describes the balanced sense of divine justice, which will reward good for good, righteous for righteous, just for just, mercy for mercy. Therefore, be merciful, deal justly, judge righteously, and do good, and your rewards will be mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness. A similar effect is achieved in Leviticus 24, where the “bruise for bruise, eye for eye” sense of talionic justice is reflected perfectly in the chiasmic structure that embraces that content.⁹

Many other examples can be given to illustrate the interpretive value of chiasmus. Chiasmus offers evidence of a text’s meaning. For example, form and content also mutually enhance each other in Alma 36, where Alma places the turning point in his life at the turning point of his chapter; and in Helaman 6 the extraordinary reciprocal agreement that allowed for travel and trade between the lands north and south is memorialized by a perfectly balanced, reciprocally structured chiasm.¹⁰

The presence of chiasmus in these passages is evidence that form and content are harmoniously linked. How this harmony came about may call for further explanation, but the fact of that harmony is established by the evidence.

Evidence about Characteristics of Individual Authors

In addition, the presence of chiasmus may prove something about the authors of these passages. Although one cannot be certain to what extent inspiration provided these

authors with the form as well as the content of their messages, on many occasions it is clear that the author alone was responsible for the passage's composition. For example, in Helaman 6 there is little reason to believe that the chronicler who recorded the entry for the sixty-fourth year of the reign of judges received the words that he wrote by way of direct revelation, and there is little reason to take away from Alma personally the credit for including the story of his own conversion when giving a blessing to his son Helaman in Alma 36. The situation, however, is more complex in Mosiah 3, where a fine example of chiasmus appears in the midst of the words spoken by the angel to King Benjamin. This may be a case in which either the angel or Benjamin used chiasmus in order to speak to the people "after the manner of their own language" (D&C 1:24), or this elevated structure may have come entirely from the angel and then may have become a pattern that subsequent Nephite writers chose to accentuate.

Skill and Training

To the extent that Book of Mormon authors created orderly, complex, coherent, beautiful, impressive, and well-structured patterns, this proves that these authors were well trained. Fine examples of chiasmus are consistent with claims made by Nephi, Enos, and others that they were taught in the languages of their fathers (see 1 Nephi 1:1–2; Enos 1:1; Mosiah 1:2). Not everyone in Book of Mormon civilizations could read or write, and the groups that had records were culturally, religiously, socially, politically, and in other ways superior to those that did not. Cultivating a high proficiency in language would have been a significant and highly valued achievement in the lives of these authors, and the presence of chiasmus indicates that these authors were skilled writers who took their writing tasks seriously.

The scribes in Egypt served a holy function. Writing was not a simply mundane function but virtually sacral.¹¹ Many indications demonstrate that “the ancient concern for language and its features in many periods may have far surpassed our own modern verbal skills.”¹² The appearance of chiasmus in their texts is therefore evidence of the skill of these authors.

Care and Diligence

Not only were these Book of Mormon authors well trained, but, as chiasmus indicates, they were careful in carrying out their training and utilizing their skills. The texts of the Book of Mormon do not appear to have been extemporaneous speeches. These structured passages are more polished and better organized than first drafts. For example, King Benjamin’s speech was not extemporaneous but was written out so that all who were not within the sound of his voice might receive his words (see Mosiah 2:8). The presence of chiasmus in such a text is evidence that these authors were careful when they wrote.

Revisions and Reworkings

Moreover, there is evidence that Book of Mormon writers tended to use chiasmus and perhaps other complex structures when they reworked their own earlier texts. Nephi reports that he recorded his life history on several occasions (see 1 Nephi 9:2; 19:1–5). His final report, recorded on his small plates, which appears to have been well organized “with almost every element in the first half of the book having a specific counterpart in the second half,”¹³ bespeaks a lifetime of reflection, and his writing of this account is a literary monument to his entire life. Similarly, the restructuring of the abrupt direct antithetical parallelisms in Mosiah

27:29–30 into the divided chiasmic pattern of Alma 36 (which reuses many of the words and phrases from the earlier account and regroups them in an overall chiasmic pattern) demonstrates that these authors were consistent and conscientious in their careful creation of the Book of Mormon text as we know it.

Authorial Intent

Chiasmus is also evidence that these texts were purposefully written to center on certain key ideas. Chiasmus is evidence of the main thoughts of these writers. For example, the contrast between pain and joy in Alma 36, or the progression of King Benjamin's instruction about service, which begins in Mosiah 2:17 and reappears in Mosiah 2:21 and ends in Mosiah 5:13, are threads that are detected and exposed by chiasmic analysis. Study of these factors provides evidence of these authors' intentional focus and clear emphasis.

Evidence of Multiple Authorship

Not all authors use chiasmus, and those who do not use it in the same ways. Thus, chiasmus can provide evidence of multiple authorship in the Book of Mormon to the extent that one can conclude that the writings of a certain author use chiasmus consistently and distinctly from the writings of other authors.

Comparative Analysis between Authors

King Benjamin, on the one hand, is quite classical and pure in his use of chiasmus. His structures are straightforward, perhaps reflecting his own interest in the classical education of his sons (see Mosiah 1:2). King Benjamin turns to chiasmus in driving home his final abstract alternatives, consistently using words like *unless*, *except*, and *therefore* as

important warnings in the structure. For instance, he says, “except they humble themselves . . . ; unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” (Mosiah 3:18–19) and “except it be through transgression; therefore take heed . . .” (Mosiah 5:11). Alma the Younger, on the other hand, seems to have been much more creative and personal in his use of chiasmus. The pair of lists that is inverted to become a list of pairs in the opposite order in Alma 41:13–15 is brilliantly creative and encouraging, as is his optimistic conversion account that turns on his innermost personal thoughts in Alma 36:19. Abinadi and others seem to have used chiasmus very little, if at all.

Diachronic Analysis

Likewise, shifts in usage from one author to another, or from one generation to another, may also offer interesting proof of historical development within the Nephite civilization. All civilizations tend to go through cycles, experiencing renaissances and renewals triggered by a revival of people’s interest in classical or earlier forms, then launching out again in their own new creative direction, only to have that creative effort burn out and have the cycle repeat and move on into another new direction. Social forces such as war, poverty, and trends of retrenchment and regeneration come and go. The manner in which chiasmus and many other literary devices are used or not used in such movements by one author or the next gives some evidence of the course of Nephite civilization.

Evidence about Nephite Culture and Society

Chiasmus may also prove things about the intellectual history or artistic movements from time to time within Nephite culture and society. For example, because chiasmus

aids people in memorization, its presence may disclose something about a people's dependence on oral transmission of teachings and stories. Surely "the ordering of terms is a helpful tool in memorization."¹⁴ Moreover, chiasmus may have been used for emphasis in instruction to impress the mind with certain memorable words and phrases. Thus, the presence of chiasmus in Nephite writing may be evidence of the way in which these writings were used by the people in instruction in the home and in the community. Indeed, it is a form that leaves a deep and lasting impression, which people will remember vividly and literally."¹⁵ Paul Gaechter even labeled chiasmus as the "traditional higher form of teaching."¹⁶ Thus, the presence of chiasmus in Nephite texts may give some evidence of the purposes served by written texts in that society.

Evidence about the Abridger

Furthermore, the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon offers evidence to confirm that this text was in fact compiled and abridged from underlying records, as the book claims. The various units within the text seem to have been preserved intact from their underlying sources, and the presence of chiasmus in those units corroborates the claim that the Book of Mormon was assembled from a set of underlying records. The fact that these structures survived the abridging process is also evidence that Mormon was relatively conservative in his abridging process, at least as far as one can determine. In other words, Mormon seems to have been relatively careful to quote entire texts—such as King Benjamin's speech, Alma's blessing to Helaman, and the annual report for the sixty-fourth year of the reign of the judges—as he incorporated those records into his own account. Mormon was often careful to identify when he was

quoting from underlying sources as opposed to paraphrasing them. That his paraphrases tend to feature very little in the way of chiasmus also shows that the style of the abridger was different from the style of the underlying texts brought into the final record by direct quotation.

Comparative Analysis between Cultures and Evidence of Israelite Origins

Having established the nature and degree of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, one is prepared to enter into the broader arena of comparative studies. Comparative literature serves many purposes in terms of identifying both similarities and differences in languages and literatures from one culture to another. The writing styles from one culture to the next, and even within a single culture from century to century, do not remain static or appear identically. Thus, one should not expect literature in the Book of Mormon to be exactly the same as any other literature. Even assuming that Nephite culture originated in Israelite society in the late seventh century B.C., we must concede that its characteristics and concerns undoubtedly diverged somewhat from that point of origin as it went its own way in its new surroundings, developed its own value priorities, had its own revelations, and was limited by its own resources and circumstances.

An Israelite Characteristic

Nevertheless, the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is certainly consistent with its claim of Israelite origins. There can be no question that chiasmus was used heavily in ancient Israelite writing at and around the time of Lehi. It may even be fair to say that chiasmus was a dominant, if not essential, element of Hebrew writing in that day.

Over the years, I have compiled a bibliography of articles and books about chiasmus in world literatures; presently it contains 522 entries, 439 of which pertain to studies of biblical passages (306 in the Old Testament and 133 in the New Testament).¹⁷ By this measure, about 85 percent of scholarly interest in chiasmus arises out of and pertains to biblical studies (one-fifth of the remaining 15 percent deals with the Book of Mormon). If this can be used as a general gauge of the value placed by scholars on using this tool in analyzing their respective bodies of literature, then chiasmus is far and away more important in biblical studies than in any other corpus of world literature. Accordingly, if the Book of Mormon did not contain chiasmus, one would undoubtedly count this against the book as a glaring deficiency. If the absence of chiasmus would be inconsistent with its claim of Israelite origins, then the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is, at least to an equal extent, evidence corroborating that claim.

Degree of Uniqueness

The extent to which this evidence may be viewed as persuasive, substantial, or perhaps even conclusive turns on the additional element of uniqueness. Because it is possible for chiasmus to occur in any world literature, its presence does not necessarily establish a causal connection or direct linkage between one text and another. On the other hand, mere presence alone is not the only factor involved in the calculation. To the extent that chiasmus is used under similar circumstances in two bodies of literature, to the extent that inverted parallel passages are constructed in similar ways from one cultural or historical setting to the next, to the extent that chiasmus is used for similar purposes in comparable settings, to the extent that it appears in units of similar

lengths, to the extent that key elements of vocabulary, syntax, and types of concepts typically involved in chiastic patterns are the same, then a full range of comparative factors can be generated to assess the degree to which various literatures use chiasmus in similar or divergent ways.

Work of this nature remains to be done on a comprehensive scale to evaluate the comparative frequencies and characteristics of chiasmus in Hebrew literature and in the Book of Mormon, but already certain notable similarities can be observed (for example, between the embodiment of the ancient Israelite concept of justice in Alma 41:13–15 and the very similar use of chiasmus in Leviticus 24:13–23, one of the finest examples of chiasmus in the Hebrew Bible). Close analysis of factors that can indicate the degree of unique congruence between chiasmus in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon would put a person in a stronger position to draw more certain conclusions about what the evidence actually proves in terms of the Book of Mormon's Israelite origins. While such work remains to be completed, extensive ad hoc comparison has impressed me that these two bodies of literature are close to each other in several respects.

In addition to evaluating the use of chiasmus in the Hebrew Bible and in the Book of Mormon, a similar analysis would then need to be run on the presence of chiasmus in all other bodies of literature. Scholars would then be in a position to draw further comparative conclusions. In general, one may feel fairly confident about the assertion that chiasmus is not natural to the Western, or the American, mind. Repetition is not a favored element of writing in modern style. Literary critics, such as Mark Twain in the nineteenth century, found the style of writing in the Book of Mormon to be unattractive, perhaps because of its repetitiveness, offering further evidence that the style of the

book was not entirely natural to the nineteenth-century mind. The degree to which chiasmus is absent from American literature, however, has not been systematically ascertained; thus, the evidentiary value of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon must of course be qualified accordingly.

Students of chiasmus in Mormon literature, on all sides of the issue, have naturally gone looking for chiasmus in other writings of Joseph Smith. On the one hand, some enemies of the Book of Mormon have purported to find chiasmus in the Doctrine and Covenants and in numerous other LDS writings, thereby attempting to prove that chiasmus can happen anywhere or was simply second nature to Joseph Smith or to Mormon rhetoric. On the other extreme, people supporting the divinity of the Book of Mormon have adopted another hypothesis—that chiasmus is to be found everywhere in divine literature and, in fact, is a *sine qua non* of all authentic revelations. I have examined numerous proposed examples of chiasmus in the writings of Joseph Smith and in other LDS sources. Perhaps my standards are wrong or too severe in the objectivity that I insist upon before I am willing to label a passage as chiastic, but I find very few of these proposed passages to be convincingly chiastic. It is true that Joseph Smith's language tended to be repetitious, but a simple repetition does not create a chiasm. In particular, other rhetorical devices seem to be more dominant in the texts of the Doctrine and Covenants and elsewhere. Thus, I have found that chiasmus is not used nearly to the same degree or in the same way in the Doctrine and Covenants or in the Pearl of Great Price as it is in the Book of Mormon. Again, although no systematic study of this issue has been completed, my assessment is based on the careful examination of numerous structures from various sources.

In the same vein, one must also be equally cautious about

the work of chiasmus fanatics who have labeled virtually every passage in the Book of Mormon as chiastic. A few biblical scholars have gone overboard with the concept as well. A good test might be to give an unmarked text to ten different uncoached but knowledgeable people to see whether most of them discover the same structure as the one that has been proposed. The more divergence that results, the less objective the suggested pattern would be.

For the time being, chiasmus offers good evidence that the Book of Mormon is strongly plausible in its claim of Israelite origin. Where this evidence would land in terms of its degree or strength of probability, however, is open to subjective evaluation. While one should not overstate the force and effect of this evidence, neither should one understate it. Does the structure of Alma 36 give that text a thirty percent chance of having Israelite influence in its cultural background? A forty-five percent chance? A fifty-five percent chance? An eighty percent chance? Certainly, this remarkable structure raises considerably more than a zero percent chance but likewise something less than a hundred percent chance. The nature of evidence is such that it does not translate itself automatically into quantifiable percentages and probabilities.

Alternative Influences

A further element in this calculation is the degree to which Joseph Smith might have learned about chiasmus from sources in his so-called information environment in Palmyra, New York, or more precisely, in the neighborhood of Harmony, Pennsylvania, where he dictated most of the Book of Mormon to his scribe Oliver Cowdery in the spring of 1829. Since no library existed within that region of the Susquehanna Valley, one cannot assume that Joseph Smith

would have had access to any of the British books that in the 1820s were beginning to comment on various forms of parallelism in biblical literature. None of those books were published in the United States, and it is only remotely possible that one or two of them made their way to the United States in Joseph Smith's lifetime. No definite listings of the titles by John Jebb or Thomas Boys have been found in any American libraries before 1829. And even if Joseph Smith had somehow learned of the concept of chiasmus, he would still be presented with the formidable task of writing—or rather, dictating—extensive texts in this style that was unnatural to his world, while at the same time keeping numerous other strands, threads, and concepts flowing without confusion in his dictation. The low probability that Joseph Smith was conscious of chiasmus in any respect tends to enhance its evidentiary value as an indicator of other origins (presumably Israelite) for this aspect of the book's style.

On the other hand, it may be suggested that Joseph Smith could have sensed intuitively the nature and importance of chiasmus as a reader of the Bible. This factor, however, is not very persuasive for several reasons. First, it is rarely the case that the Hebrew or Greek chiastic patterns have been preserved rigorously through the process of English translation. In many cases, the English translators preferred to correct the inverted verb orders and to restructure them in more natural English word orders. Moreover, many biblical scholars who work regularly with the texts do not naturally write in chiastic forms themselves, and many of them are not aware, either consciously or subconsciously, of the chiastic structure of biblical text. When I presented a paper on chiasmus in biblical law to a conference of the Jewish Law Association held in Boston, several distinguished Jewish scholars were quite astonished that a Gentile could

show them something as distinctive and remarkable in their own Torah as the arrangements in Leviticus 24 and elsewhere. I was not the first to discover chiasmus in Leviticus 24, but the present point is simply to show that structures such as these do not naturally jump out at readers—even at those who read this text regularly and assiduously, and in Hebrew—without someone pointing these patterns out to them. Consequently, it assumes too much to believe that the young Joseph Smith’s reading of the King James English adequately explains the extensive and objectively rigorous instances of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. I am not aware of anyone who seriously contends that Joseph Smith or anyone associated with him knew or could have known of chiasmus or had the training or time or academic inclination to discover this principle for himself. The evidence is overwhelming against such a claim.

Evidence of Translation from a Hebrew Text

Occasionally, chiasmus combines with other factors to provide additional evidence that the Book of Mormon was translated from an underlying Hebrew text. In Helaman 6:10, for example, the chiastic turning point features the two words “Lord” and “Zedekiah” at the very center of this textual unit (the center of Helaman 6:7–13 features the following words: south, Lehi, north, Mulek, Zedekiah; Lord, Mulek, north, Lehi, south). The theophoric suffix at the end of the name Zedekiah (*-iah*) would in all probability have been obvious to the ancient reader as an element clearly paralleling the related Hebrew word for “Lord.” Since this chiasm works even better in Hebrew than it does in English, it is reasonable to count this as further evidence that the chiasm was originally composed in Hebrew or a related tongue.

No comprehensive analysis of the chiastic passages in

the Book of Mormon has ever been undertaken to determine how many of these chiasms would in certain respects work better in Hebrew than they do in English, but such a study should probably be undertaken even in spite of its obvious limitations. Simultaneously, the same kind of examination should probably be initiated with respect to other forms of parallelism and other literary qualities of the Book of Mormon. Of course, such studies would never produce conclusive results, because their conclusions would be based on conjectures as to what the underlying text might originally have been. But until such studies are undertaken, it remains impossible to judge what kind of results they might generate. In general terms, however, the presence of the purposeful orderliness of these texts yields relatively strong evidence that the text was not produced alone by a process of rough-draft dictation. Yet the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, which is essentially its text today, is known to have been produced in exactly this fashion, as a first-draft dictation, which is consistent with Joseph Smith's claim that it was translated from an older document.

Evidence about the Nature of the Translation

Finally, chiasmus may prove something about the precision of Joseph Smith's work as translator. Evidently, his translation was consistent. Each time a word appeared within a given framework, it seems to have been rendered by the same English word. Otherwise, structures such as Mosiah 5:10–12, Alma 41:13–15, and others would not have survived through the translation process. Of course, it is impossible to know how many other parallelisms or other literary features might have been lost in the translation process, but in many cases, it is possible to see that an internally consistent result was produced in the English text, presumably by vir-

tue of a relatively literal and consistent method of translation from the ancient record.

Conclusion

Thus, the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon demonstrates many things about the English text, the writers of the book, the Nephites' civilization, the abridgment by Mormon, the origins of Nephite culture, comparative elements regarding other cultures, the underlying Hebrew nature of the text, and the translation by Joseph Smith. Although it is difficult to determine exactly what is proved by chiasmus, its presence is evidence of numerous qualities and features. In my opinion, the multiple phenomena of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon amount to a very strong complex of interlocking evidences that the book is an ancient record that originated just as its authors and its translator said it did.

As evidence of Book of Mormon authorship, the discovery of biblical-style chiasms in the Book of Mormon strongly tends to reduce the probability that Joseph Smith or any of his contemporaries could have written the book. For those who are inclined to think about such matters in terms of statistical probabilities, the multiple findings discussed in this essay may be summarized in the form of a series of predictions: for instance, what is the likelihood of chiasms not only accidentally occurring, but also intensifying the orderly character of the text, increasing the intricate depth of the text, significantly enhancing its artistic achievement, precisely fitting natural textual units, systematically clarifying meaning and providing demonstrable keys to textual interpretation, maintaining stylistic consistency within the writings of individual authors, emerging as reworkings of earlier texts, corresponding with other dimensions of authorial intent, appearing principally in quoted original texts as

opposed to abridged materials, and working even better in Hebrew than English? The probability that all these and other similar predictions would simultaneously occur becomes remotely small, lending considerable cumulative weight that corroborates the explanation of the book's origins declared by Joseph Smith and claimed by the book itself.

This paper draws together things I have said about chiasmus for over twenty-five years, but it focuses for the first time specifically on the question of what this all may prove. Perhaps in the end, and as I stated in 1981, "the study of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon shows how badly misunderstood a writing can be if it is not examined carefully."¹⁸ Indeed, the Book of Mormon has probably suffered more than its fair share of misunderstanding. Thomas O'Dea once remarked that the Book of Mormon "has not been universally considered as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion on it."¹⁹ Surely, however, the book must be read, and read with sufficient effort to perceive its form and content. As is generally true, "wherever chiasmus demonstrably exists, its potential impact on interpretation and textual analysis stands to be profound,"²⁰ and thus, as is the case with much of ancient literature, the design and depth of the Book of Mormon often comes to light only when the book is studied with chiastic and other ancient literary principles in mind.

Obviously much work remains to be done before we will come to a full assessment of the weight to be given to this evidence with respect to various inquiries about the book. Chiasmus provides probative information that helps to answer numerous questions about the Book of Mormon. It may not prove absolutely that the Book of Mormon is or is not anything in particular, but then it is rarely the case that evidence of any kind ever produces results that conclusive.

Evidence is simply an indication of, a probing of, things not seen. With these elements in mind, the study of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon will undoubtedly continue to be a valuable tool in probing or proving the texts of the Book of Mormon and their possible meanings.

Notes

1. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10/1 (1969): 69–84; slightly revised and reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 33–52, republished in 1996 by FARMS.

2. For criteria of chiasmus, see Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 40–1; John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim, Germany: Gerstenberg, 1981), 11, 13; John W. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying the Presence of Chiasmus" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989), expanded and updated as "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 1–14. For an illustration of the application of the fifteen criteria discussed in the article on identifying the presence of chiasmus, see John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 114–31, and my longer paper on the same subject, "Chiasmus in Alma 36" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989).

3. For a recent discussion of this topic, see John W. Welch, "The Power of Evidence in the Nurturing of Faith," in *Nurturing Faith through the Book of Mormon: The Twenty-Fourth Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 149–86.

4. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 13.

5. Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36."

6. John W. Welch, "Three Accounts of Alma's Conversion," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 150–3.

7. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 12.

8. Ibid.

9. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Biblical Law," *Jewish Law Association Studies IV: The Boston Conference Volume*, ed. Bernard Jackson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 5–22, especially 7–11.

10. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13" (Provo: FARMS, 1987); see also Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 230–2.

11. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Genesis of the Written Word," *New Era* (September 1973): 38–50.

12. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 14.

13. Ibid., 199. For a different proposed analysis, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies* 20/2 (1980): 131–49, reprinted in Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship*, 53–74; parts of Reynold's substructural analysis are compatible with my view that 1 Nephi was divided from 2 Nephi in order to signal that 1 Nephi as a whole was composed as a single structure.

14. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 12.

15. See Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 12 n. 12.

16. Paul Gaechter, *Die literarische Kunst im Matthäus Evangelium* (Stuttgart, Germany: Katholishes Bibelwerk, 1965), 7; Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 12.

17. The most recent edition of this bibliography is available from FARMS. An earlier version of this document, based on the bibliography in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, was first offered by FARMS in 1987.

18. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 209.

19. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

20. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 15.