Book of Mormon Central

Word Groups in the Book of Mormon

Author(s): John A. Tvedtnes and Kevin L. Barney
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*"Lamanites . . . were converted unto the true faith;
and they would not depart from it, for they were firm,
and steadfast, and immovable." (3 Nephi 6:14)*

An early issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* included Kevin L. Barney's article on word pairs—a common feature in the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament—in the Book of Mormon.[1] As Barney explained, word pairs are generally synonymous or antithetic and were used as the basic building blocks for parallel lines, often in repeating or formulaic fashion. For example, two words frequently paired together in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Old Testament in the creation of parallel lines are *earth* and *world:*

The *earth* is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof;
    the *world,* and they that dwell therein. (Psalm 24:1)

Their line is gone out throughout all the *earth,*
    and their words to the end of the *world.* (Psalm 19:4)

The relationship between the words in a pair became sufficiently strong that these words were often juxtaposed in prose settings.

The same phenomenon underlying word pairs could also lead to more extensive groupings of words. For example, consider Isaiah 1:8:

> And the daughter of Zion is left
> like a *booth* in a vineyard,
> like a *lodge* in a cucumber field,
> like a besieged *city*.[2]

Here the words *booth* and *lodge* would have sufficed, both to fill out the poetic line and to get the message across, but the prophet added a third word, *city*. There was a time when some scholars would have assumed that the part of the line containing the unnecessary third word ("like a besieged city") had been added after the fact; today, however, it is widely recognized that such tricola are an authentic means of expression in Hebrew poetry. Thus, although word pairs are by far the most common phenomenon, many passages also reflect what we might call *word triplets*.

A word triplet is the simplest example of what I refer to as a *word group*. More extensive groupings can include four, five, six, or more words. One scholar noted twenty-five such examples in Isaiah alone.[3]

Word groups tend to fall into certain categories. Perhaps the most common categories include animals, the implements of war, precious metals and jewels, plants and trees, and agricultural items. For instance, a precious-metals word group from Job 28:1–6 includes silver, gold, iron, brass, stone, sapphire, and gold (again), and an implements-of-war group from Job 41:26–29 includes sword, spear, dart, javelin (KJV "habergeon"), arrow, slingstone, club (KJV "dart" is incorrect), and another type of spear (a different Hebrew word).

I first noted the possible presence of word groups in the Book of Mormon in connection with 3 Nephi 6:14. It struck me, when reading that passage, that the words "firm, and steadfast, and immovable" seemed to be a quote from Lehi's words to his son Lemuel in 1 Nephi 2:10. It seemed beyond coincidence that Mormon, who abridged the

record in 3 Nephi, should have used the same three words employed by Lehi.[4] Either Mormon was quoting Lehi's words or the combined use of these words was common among the Nephites. Investigating further, I found word pairs such as "firm and steadfast" (Helaman 15:8), and "steadfast and immovable" (Mosiah 5:15; Alma 1:25). But the parallels run deeper. Both Alma 1:25 and 3 Nephi 6:14 note that the people were steadfast and immovable in "keep[ing] the commandments of God [the Lord]," thus reflecting Lehi's words in 1 Nephi 2:10. Equally significant is that Helaman 15:8 and 3 Nephi 6:14 refer to being steadfast in/unto the [true] faith, and both passages are describing converted Lamanites. Remember that Lehi used the words *firm, steadfast, and immovable* to admonish Lemuel, one of the ancestors of the Lamanites, to be faithful.

This made me wonder about other word groups, such as *temples, sanctuaries,* and *synagogues* in Alma 16:13 and the variants *synagogues, houses, temples,* and *sanctuaries* (see Alma 23:2); *houses, streets, hills, temples, synagogues* (see Alma 26:29); *synagogues, houses,* and *streets* (see Alma 32:1); and *temples, synagogues,* and *sanctuaries* (Helaman 3:9, 14). In his sermon, Jesus used the word pair *synagogues/streets* (see Matthew 6:2, 5; 3 Nephi 13:2, 5), while *houses/streets* appears in Isaiah 15:3 and *hills/streets* in Isaiah 5:25. The words are in a parallel construction in both Isaiah passages.

It may be perfectly natural to couple *old/young,* but when combined with other pairs, the effect is startling. Consider, for example, Alma 1:30, "both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female." The same group of three pairs is used in Alma 11:44, which adds a fourth pair, "both the wicked and the righteous." Similar is the passage in Alma 5:49, which speaks of "both old and young, both bond and free . . . the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation." It seems more

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than coincidental that only the record kept by Alma the Younger employs the grouping of pairs *old/young, bond/free.*

While no other writers use the pair *bond/free,* Nephi wrote of "both old and young, both male and female" (1 Nephi 8:27). King Benjamin addressed his words to "all ye old men, and also ye young men, and you little children who can understand my words" (Mosiah 2:40). Such passages are similar to Joel 2:28 (also cited in Acts 2:17), where we have the double pairing: *your sons* and *your daughters, your old men, your young men.*

Zeniff, speaking of the war between his people and the Lamanites, described his people in terms of "women and children . . . old men . . . and . . . young men" (Mosiah 10:9). Mormon, also describing a war with the Lamanites, spoke of how the enemy spared "neither old nor young; and they delight in everything save that which is good; and the suffering of our women and our children" (Moroni 9:19). This kind of pairing in describing victims of warfare is also found in the Bible. Isaiah wrote of the Egyptian and Ethiopian "captives, young and old, naked and barefoot" who would be taken by the Assyrians (Isaiah 20:4). In 2 Chronicles 36:17, we read of the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem that "the king of the Chaldees . . . slew their young men with the sword . . . and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age." The same slaughter is described in several other Bible passages. Through Jeremiah, the Lord declared that he would "break in pieces man and woman . . . old and young . . . the young man and the maid" (Jeremiah 51:22). "The young and the old lie on the ground in the streets: my virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword" (Lamentations 2:21). Jeremiah's younger contemporary, Ezekiel, wrote, "Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women" (Ezekiel 9:6). A later Persian king ordered the destruction of "all Jews, both young and

old, little children and women" (Esther 3:13). Also of interest is the description given in Joshua 6:21 of the destruction of Jericho by the Israelites: "And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword."

The addition of animal groups to human pairs is also found in Psalm 148:10–12, "Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl: Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth: Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children," and in Exodus 10:9, "We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds." The latter, taken from the account of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, is similar to the exodus of the people of Limhi described in Mosiah 22:2:

> And it came to pass that they could find no way to deliver themselves out of bondage, except it were to take their women and children, and their flocks, and their herds, and their tents, and depart into the wilderness; for the Lamanites being so numerous, it was impossible for the people of Limhi to contend with them, thinking to deliver themselves out of bondage by the sword.

The combination *flocks/herds* is common in both the Book of Mormon and the Bible. In Alma 1:29 and Helaman 6:12, the listing is "flocks and herds, and fatlings," which is similar to the listing of "flocks, and herds, and the camels" in Genesis 32:7. To *flocks* and *herds*, Genesis 26:14 and Genesis 24:35 add *servants*. The latter also adds *silver* and *gold*, which form part of another word group.

From its earliest pages, the Book of Mormon speaks of *gold, silver,* and *precious things* (see 1 Nephi 2:4, 11; 3:22, 24; Mosiah 19:15; 22:12; Alma 15:16; 17:14)—a list that is paralleled in several Bible passages (see 2 Kings 20:13; 2 Chronicles 21:3; Ezra 1:6; Isaiah 39:2; Daniel 11:38, 43).[5]

Some passages expand the list to include such elements as *wood, buildings, machinery, iron, copper, brass, steel,* and *ziff* (see 2 Nephi 5:15–16; Jarom 1:8; Mosiah 11:8–10). The Bible, too, adds other items to the list. In 1 Chronicles 29:2, we read of *gold, silver, brass, iron, wood, onyx stones, glistering stones,* (stones) *of divers colours, precious stones,* and *marble stones.*

Some Book of Mormon descriptions add cloth materials—*silks, scarlets, fine-twined linen*—to the basic list of *gold, silver,* and *precious things* (see 1 Nephi 13:7, 8; Alma 1:29; 4:6; 31:28; Ether 9:17; 10:23–24). This list is similar to the one found throughout the book of Revelation, which describes the same harlot or apostate church seen by Nephi in his vision (see Revelation 17:4; 18:12, 16), and in the description of the materials used by Moses to construct the tabernacle in the wilderness (see Exodus 25:4; 26:1, 31, 36; 27:16; 28:5–6, 8, 15, 33; 35:5–6, 22–23, 25, 35; 36:8, 35, 37; 38:18, 23; 39:1–3, 5, 8, 24–25, 29) and used in other Bible passages (see 2 Samuel 1:24; Proverbs 31:21–22; Ezekiel 16:10, 13; Daniel 5:7, 16, 29; Luke 16:19). *Silver, gold, raiment,* and *precious things* are noted in Genesis 24:53.

Some Book of Mormon passages seem to combine all or most of these word groups and add others. Thus Alma 1:29 and 4:6 include the *flocks/herds, gold/silver,* and *silk/linen* lists, and the former adds *grains.* Some passages combine *fields* or *grains* with some of the other lists of precious commodities already discussed (see 2 Nephi 5:11; Mosiah 7:22; Alma 3:2; 4:2; 62:29; Helaman 12:2; 3 Nephi 3:22; 6:2; Ether 9:17; 10:12).[6] Similar lists are found in the Bible (see Deuteronomy 8:13; 12:17; 14:23; 2 Chronicles 32:27–29; Jeremiah 31:12).

A passage that has come under fire from critics because it uses terms for animals not found in the New World when the Spaniards arrived is 1 Nephi 18:25: "And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the

forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals" (compare the list in Ether 9:18–19). Several possible explanations have been proffered for this list, some of which have been discussed elsewhere. Here, I will suggest that the list may be a formulaic grouping of animal names. Such formulaic groupings are known from the Bible, where the most common combination is the *ox* and the *ass* (see Exodus 20:17; Job 6:5; 24:3; Isaiah 1:3; 32:20). But we also have the *ox* and *lamb* (see Isaiah 66:3; Jeremiah 11:19); the *cow* and *ewe* (see Leviticus 22:28); the *cow, sheep,* and *goat* (see Numbers 18:17); and the *bullock, sheep,* and *goat* (see Leviticus 22:27). One of the longer lists is the one found in Zechariah 14:15, where we have the *horse, mule, camel, ass,* and other *beasts.*

In this brief communication, I have discussed just a few word groupings that have come to my attention. I suspect that a closer examination of such groupings will reveal even more ties between the Book of Mormon and the biblical world and will show deliberate patterning of parts of the Book of Mormon text on Bible themes in subtle ways that demonstrate the extreme complexity of the Nephite record. It is that complexity that makes the Book of Mormon believable as an authentic ancient text rooted in the Near East of more than two and a half millennia ago.

NOTES

1. See Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 15–81. This article built on Barney's earlier study,

"Understanding Old Testament Poetry," *Ensign* (June 1990): 50–54. I had already been looking at word groups in the Nephite record, and what I found seemed to be a natural supplement to Barney's work, though I must add, as he did (see "Poetic Diction," p. 23 n. 20), that illustrations are not intended to be exhaustive and that I expect that others will continue to find new examples.

2. The translation, together with this basic overview of biblical word groups, is from William R. Watters, *Formula Criticism and the Poetry of the Old Testament*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 138 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 95–98. Watters refers to the phenomenon of extended word groups as "long tours." Ibid., 96. My thanks to Kevin L. Barney for bringing this study to my attention.

3. See ibid., 97–98. When the phenomenon was first observed, some scholars objected that word groups violated economies of composition, and fanciful theories were put forward to explain them. According to one such theory, word groups reflected a conscious effort by the poet to keep alive words that otherwise would have passed into oblivion from disuse. A much simpler and more likely explanation is that word groups were produced for the same reason as word pairs themselves—to create artistic poetry. Watters noted that "the point which could be made with two words in pair is made in more stunning effect with six or eight words in pair" (ibid., 109).

4. Critics will surely point out the word group *fixed, immovable, and unchangeable* in Doctrine and Covenants 88:133 as evidence that this was Joseph Smith's language. But in view of the other ties between the passages, this seems untenable. Moreover, one would expect Joseph Smith's revelations to echo earlier scriptures, such as the Bible and the Book of Mormon, since God was the source of all revelation.

5. A variant—*gold, silver, riches*—is found in Mosiah 4:19.

6. Passages in Ether, here as elsewhere in this brief study, may have been influenced by that book's Nephite editor, Moroni, rather than being part of the original Jaredite record. Note Doctrine and Covenants 136:11, which may have some dependence on the Book of Mormon passages, especially Alma 34:20–27.