“I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm
degree of a just God, for I know that he granted unto
men according to their desire, whether it be unto
death or unto life; yea, I know that he allotteth unto
men, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are
unalterable, according to their wills, whether they
be unto salvation or unto destruction.”
Alma 29:4

Many scholars have long recognized chiasmus as a char-
acteristic literary feature of ancient Israelite and Near
Eastern writing. Since the Book of Mormon was pre-
dominately written on ancient American soil, however,
the question may naturally arise: is there evidence that
any ancient American authors knew about and used
chiasmus? Several experts in pre-Columbian American
poetics have concluded: yes, ancient American writers
did use chiasmus in a variety of ways.

Allen J. Christenson first discovered chiasmus in K’iche’
Maya texts in the 1980s. Christenson found chiasmus
present in several colonial-era Maya documents, in-
cluding some elaborate examples in the Popol Vuh,
which is “by far the most important K’iche’ document
to have survived.” Other native Maya documents using
chiasmus include Título Coyoi, a native ritual drama
called Rabinal Achi, and the Annals of the Cakchiquels
(the K’iche’s biggest rivals).

However, not all colonial Mayan documents feature
chiasmus and so Christenson compared those that did
with those that did not. He noticed that writings which
utilized chiasmus tended to be those written before
1580 by a member of the ruling lineage. These docu-
ments generally lacked Spanish or Christian influence,
focused on pre-Columbian history or religion, and
often explicitly claimed to be based on earlier written
sources. Hence, Christenson felt that “chiasmus is an indigenous literary form not employed by Colonial era Spanish writers,” and thus “may be useful in determining the relative antiquity of ancient writings composed by the K’iche’ Maya.”

Since Christenson’s initial discovery of chiasmus in native Maya documents, several other scholars have found chiasms in Mayan writings. Kerry Hull and Danny Law have documented chiasms in the writings of Ch’ortí’ and Ch’olí Maya, respectively. Nicholas Hopkins and Kathryn Josserand found “chiasmic structure” in folktales of the Chol Maya. Gretchen Whalen and Charles Hoffling noted its presence in Yucatec Maya narratives and Mopan and Itzaj Maya storytelling, respectively. Jon McGee used chiasmus and parallelisms found in the ritual dramas of the Lacandon Maya to support their pre-Columbian origin.

Chiasmus has also been found in definitively pre-Columbian texts. For example, Michela Craveri and Rogelio Valencia found chiasms in both the Dresden Codex and the Madrid Codex. These codices are both dated to the late post-Classic period (ca. AD 1200–1500), although both are believed to be, at least in part, copies of older material from the Classic period (AD 300–900).

Inscriptional texts from the Classic period also utilize chiasmus, such as the hieroglyphic stairs at Dos Pilas, an inscribed bone found at Tikal, and Stela D at Pusilha. At Yaxchilán, Josserand argued that the chiastic arrangement of Lintel 23 reveals the name of an otherwise unknown royal heir, who may have ruled during a key ten-year gap in Yaxchilán’s dynastic history.

According to Michael Carrasco, chiasmus was also used in inscriptions at Palenque, including the use of “envelope chiasmus”—where the beginning and end of a text form a chiasm—to frame three different historical narratives. Hopkins and Josserand identified what is probably the most elaborate example of chiasmus among the Classic Mayan inscriptions: Quiriguá Stela C, featuring a 7-line chiasm with three parallel sets of triplets, instead of the usual couplet, in the middle.

According to Kerry Hull, “The poetic and literary aspects of Maya hieroglyphic texts are just beginning to come into focus.” Thus there is still much to learn about the use of chiasmus and other poetic devices in ancient America. Nonetheless, current evidence supports the presence of a poetic tradition at least as far back as the Early Classic period. Within that poetic tradition, Gretchen Whalen has stated that “chiasmus … is the culmination of Maya literary style.”

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**Examples of Chiasmus in the Popol Vuh**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>The face of the earth has not yet appeared.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>There was not yet anything gathered together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>All is at rest. Nothing stirs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>All is languid, at rest in the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>There is not yet anything standing erect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>There is not yet anything that might exist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lines 119–132)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>First the earth was created,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>The mountains and valleys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>The waterways were divided,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Their branches coursing among mountains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Thus the waters were divided,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Revealing the great mountains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>For thus was the creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Of the earth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lines 253–261)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>When they were multiplied,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>There in the East.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Truly these became the names of the people:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Sovereign,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Ballplayer,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masker,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Sun Lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>These are the titles of the people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>It was there in the East,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>That they multiplied.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lines 5171–5180)
A On 10 Muluc 17 Uo was dedicated the doorway of the house of Lady Xok, the sibling of Lady Pakal Xok, the child of Great Lady Xibalba, the child of Lord Aj K’an Xok, the sibling of Lady Tajal Tun, Bakab, the mother of Aj Tzik, Lady Xok

A 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ahau 8 Cumku, the Creation Event took place.
B Three stones were set:
C a The Paddler Gods erected a stone,
   b in the First Five Sky place;
   c it was the Jaguar Throne Stone.
C a The Black Deity erected a stone,
   b in the Large Town place;
   c it was the Snake Throne Stone.
C a And then it came to pass that Itzamna set a stone,
   c the Water Throne Stone,
   b in the Sky place.
B This was the First Three Stones
A 13 Baktuns were completed, under the supervision of the Six Sky Lord

Using chiastic analysis as a tool has yielded several worthwhile results in the study of Maya literature. In terms of dating, the presence of chiasmus in colonial Maya manuscripts is commonly taken as evidence of a pre-Columbian background or origin of those texts. Since the Book of Mormon purports to be a religious document from pre-Columbian America, comparing how chiasmus is used by both Book of Mormon and Maya authors can be fruitful.

For instance, Christenson proposed that the “presence of chiasmus in highland Maya texts may suggest an oral tradition.”20 In the Book of Mormon, Carl Cran- ny found that chiasmus and other forms of parallelism occur more frequently in the parts that were originally given orally.21

A common feature of ancient American chiastic texts is “the presence of dialogue,” noting that often, “the dialogue was itself arranged as a chiasm.”22 Nephi, at least, appears to have utilized chiasmus to structure dialogues with his brothers.23 Furthermore, revelatory dialogue, according to Terryl Givens, is one of the most significant features of the Book of Mormon text,24 and it is highlighted by a chiastic pattern on at least one occasion: the overarching structure of 1 Nephi places his revelatory dialogue with the Spirit and an angel as “the fulcrum on which the entire, complexly organized account of 1 Nephi balances.”25

In this light, it is significant that King Benjamin’s speech, given on a formal, royal ceremonial occasion, is one of the most extensively chiastic and parallel-structured sections in all of the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 2–5).29 Other examples of religious or political leaders speaking on formal or ceremonial occasions in the Book of Mormon, like both Alma 5 and 7, also feature a high use of chiasmus and other poetic parallelisms.30

Particular chiastic styles are also found in both Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon. For example, 1 Nephi 11:17–3, when paired with 1 Nephi 14:29–30 forms an “envelope chiasm,” like those found at Palenque.31 In Mosiah 3:11–16 the overall chiastic structure is also framed by an envelope chiasm.32 Alma 29:1–7 features three sets of triplets at its center (Alma 29:4–5), as is similarly found at the chiastic center of Quiriguá Stela C.33 Some Book of Mormon poetics also use identical key terms as those found in Mayan inscriptions.34

Overall, these recent findings show that uses of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon fit surprisingly well within ancient “America’s earliest known literary tradition.”35


5. For the most complete report of his findings, see Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus in Ancient Mesoamerica” (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1988). See also Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’,” 311–336.


19. Whalen, “The Power of the Paradigm,” 12. This claim is first made on p. 10: “Chiasmic … form represents the most complete elaboration of Maya literary style.”

20. Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’,” 318. This is typical of parallelism in most cultures around the world.


22. Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’,” 332. As Christenson pointed out (pp. 312–313) this was also a common use of chiasmus in Greek and Latin literature.


31. See Neal Rappleye, “‘The Things Which my Father Saw’: The Chiastic Inclusio of 1 Nephi 11–14,” at Studio et Quoque Fide: A Blog on Latter-day Saint Apologetics, Scholarship, and Commentary, May 9, 2015, online at studioetquoquefide.com. In biblical studies, envelope structures are referred to as inclusio.


33. For the chiastic structure of Alma 29 see Parry, Poetic Parallelism, 298. Mosiah 3:1–3 (awake/awoke/awake) and Helaman 6:21–26 (brother/brother/brother) also feature triplets in the center, though they are simpler. See Parry, Poetic Parallelism, 164, 406–407.
