What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 1

“And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins”
2 Nephi 25:26

In the last fifty years, hundreds of chiasms have been potentially identified in the Book of Mormon.1 As John W. Welch noted in 1995, there are “varying degrees of chiasticity,” and while “many proposed chiasms are impressive and interesting; others appear to be contrived or unremarkable.”2 In other words, not all chiasms are created equal.

So to celebrate the discovery of chiasmus fifty years ago, we at Book of Mormon Central will present 10 of the most interesting chiasms in the Book of Mormon over the next three weeks, starting with three today. Each one is interesting for different reasons. Some are impressive for their display of artistry and creativity, others are important for the doctrinal truths they help to teach, clarify, or emphasize, while yet others are significant because of ancient Hebrew or Mayan connections.

Readers are invited to evaluate these chiasms themselves utilizing the criteria discussed previously.3

Editor’s Note: This is part our on-going series on chiasmus, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of its discovery in the Book of Mormon. Be sure to check out our other KnoWhys on chiasmus and the Chiasmus Resources website for more information.

Mosiah 5:10–12

The Know

This was the first chiastic passage ever discovered in the Book of Mormon five decades ago, so it only seems fitting to begin with it here.4 Statistically, Mosiah 5:10–12 is one of the four strongest chiasms in the Book of Mormon.5 It is a tightly structured, well-balanced chiasm, found toward the end of King Benjamin’s speech, and is the central piece to a larger chiastic structure in the final section of that famous discourse,6 thus “emphasiz[ing] the central importance of taking upon oneself the name of Christ.”7

The Why

This chiasm incorporates terms used nowhere else in the Book of Mormon: left hand of God and blotted out.8 The use of such rare terms twice in such a well-balanced passage adds to the deliberateness of the chiastic pattern, and thus it “simply strains reason to imagine that
such a structure ... occurred accidentally.” It is “precise, extensive, and meaningful,” as it powerfully builds to its climax, intensifying King Benjamin’s warning against transgression. All these features make this passage arguably “one of the great chiastic writings of all time.”

**Chiastic Structure of Mosiah 5:10–12**

A And now it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ
   B must be called by some other name;
   C therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God.
   D And I would that ye should remember also, that this is the name
     E that I said I should give unto you that never should be blotted out,
     F except it be through transgression;
     F therefore, take heed that ye do not transgress,
     E that the name be not blotted out of your hearts.
   D I say unto you, I would that ye should remember to retain the name
   C written always in your hearts, that ye are not found on the left hand of God,
   B but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called,
A and also, the name by which he shall call you.

**2 Nephi 1:5–7**

**The Know**

Current editions of the Book of Mormon actually make this chiasm harder to detect, because in 2 Nephi 1:5 it says “the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me.” This wording has been traced back to the printer’s manuscript, but the original manuscript has consecrated instead of covenanted. This correction makes a stronger parallel with the statement “this land is consecrated” in 2 Nephi 1:7, and thus makes the chiasm clearer.

**Chiastic Structure of 2 Nephi 1:5–7**

A But, said he, notwithstanding our afflictions,
   B we have obtained a land of promise,
   a land which is choice above all other lands,
   a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be
   a land for the inheritance of my seed.
   C Yea, the Lord hath consecrated this land unto me, and to my children forever,
     D and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord.
     E Wherefore, I, Lehi, prophesy according to the workings of the Spirit which is in me,
     D that there shall none come into this land save they should be brought by the hand of the Lord.
   C Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring.
   B And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a
     land of liberty unto them,
A wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity.

**The Why**

This example illustrates why it is important to have the most accurate version of the text when looking for chiasms and other word patterns in the Book of Mormon. In addition, Royal Skousen has used chiastic patterns to help determine which variant of the original text is most likely correct, or even when a conjectural emendation might be necessary. Thus, chiasmus is more than just a neat curiosity—it is a literary and textual tool which can aid in determining the most accurate version of the text.
The Know

This passage forms a “messianic hymn” within Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah, and is statistically a very strong chiasm, with a high likelihood (99.98%) of being intentional. Two somewhat different chiastic patterns have been proposed for this passage, both of which are multilayered and centered on the fact that Nephite leaders talked, rejoiced, preached, prophesied, and wrote about Christ for the benefit of their rising generation.

Chiastic Structure of 2 Nephi 25:24–27

Proposal 1
A a And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses
  b and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ,
  c until the law shall be fulfilled
    d For, for this end was the law given,
B wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith;
yet we keep the law because of the commandments.
  C And we talk of Christ,
  we rejoice in Christ,
  we preach of Christ,
  we prophesy of Christ
  C and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know
to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.
B Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ
A d and know for what end the law was given.
  c And after the law is fulfilled
    b in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him
a when the law ought to be done away.

Proposal 2
A a And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ,
  b we keep the law of Moses
B a and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ,
  b until the law shall be fulfilled
C For, for this end was the law given,
  D a wherefore the law hath become dead unto us
    b and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith;
yet we keep the law because of the commandments.
  E And we talk of Christ,
  we rejoice in Christ,
  we preach of Christ,
  we prophesy of Christ
  E and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know
to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.
B Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know
  D the deadness of the law;
    a and they, by knowing the deadness of the law,
      b may look forward unto that life which is in Christ
  C and know for what end the law was given.
B And after the law is fulfilled in Christ,
A that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away.

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Notes


7. John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), chart 131.

8. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 373.


11. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 373.


13. This chiasm was proposed by Robert F. Smith, personal communication with Book of Mormon Central Staff, May 30, 2017.


17. The text here follows the wording in Royal Skousen, ed., The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 73.


22. See Newton, “Nephi’s Use of Inverted Parallels,” 96–97.
