What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 2

In the last fifty years, hundreds of chiasms have been proposed in the Book of Mormon. 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.” 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. Three were presented last week, and now we present four more. 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.

Mosiah 3:18–19

The Know

After first discovering chiasmus in Mosiah 5:10–12, John W. Welch turned back to the beginning of King Benjamin’s speech and then soon discovered a second example of chiasmus, in Mosiah 3:18–19. Like Mosiah 5:10–12, it is statistically one of the strongest chiasms in the Book of Mormon. It is also “one of the longest and most precise chiastic centerpieces in Benjamin’s speech,” and “occurs at the center of the central section of the whole speech,” which is itself arranged as a chiasm.

The Why

The term natural man occurs nowhere else in all of the Book of Mormon, strengthening the likelihood that this chiasm is intentional. With this passage at the center, Benjamin’s “entire speech centers on a proclamation of the need for atonement/purification.” It “is clearly the turning point of a righteous relationship with God, the point of conversion, and the precondition of the covenant.”
Chiastic Structure of Alma 41:13–15

A men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves
B and become as little children,
C and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.
D For the natural man
E is an enemy to God,
F and has been from the fall of Adam
F and will be, forever and ever,
E unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,
D and putteth off the natural man
C and becometh a saint through the atoning of Christ the Lord,
B and becometh as a child,
A submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

Alma 41:13–15

The Know

In this passage Alma pulled off “an unusual but extremely successful occurrence of chiasmus.” Alma explained the principle of “restoration” in the next life by first laying out four paired terms which he then repeated in reverse order twice. As John W. Welch succinctly put it, “Alma writes a list of pairs and then a pair of lists.”

The Why

In the list of pairs, the first occurrence of good, righteous, just, and merciful are each describing a reward which is paired with a condition to be met in the second occurrence of good, righteous, just, and merciful. This order is reversed in the list of pairs—the first list urges Corianton to be merciful, just, righteous, and good, while the second list promises that if he does these things, he will be rewarded with mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness. This both adds to the “chiasticity” of the passage, and adds impact to Alma’s teachings. John W. Welch marveled at this “great play on words.”

Chiastic Structure of Alma 41:13–15

A the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again
B evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—
C a good for that which is good;
 b righteous for that which is righteous;
  c just for that which is just;
   d merciful for that which is merciful.
C therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren;
 C c deal justly,
 b judge righteously,
 a and do good continually;
 and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward;
 C d yea, ye shall have mercy restored unto you again;
 c ye shall have justice restored unto you again;
 b ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again;
 a and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again.
B For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored;
A therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.
**Helaman 6:7–13**

**The Know**

This passage is another one of the four statistically strongest chiasms in the Book of Mormon.\(^{15}\) This passage reports on the sixty-fourth year of the reign of judges, and the entirety of the year is summarized as a chiasm. Chiasmus was the perfect literary device to express this “unprecedented turning point in Nephite history” when there was extensive “prosperity, free travel, and peace between both the Nephites and Lamanites.”\(^{16}\)

**Chiastic Structure in Helaman 6:7–13**

A And behold, there was peace in all the land,

B a insomuch that the Nephites did go

  b into whatsoever part of the land they would,

  c whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites.

a And it came to pass that the Lamanites did also go

  b whithersoever they would,

  c whether it were among the Lamanites or among the Nephites;

and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire.

C And it came to pass that they became exceedingly rich, both the Lamanites and the Nephites,

D and they did have an exceeding plenty of gold, and of silver, and of all manner of precious metals, both in the land south and in the land north.

E a Now the land south

  b was called Lehi,

  c and the land north

  d was called Mulek,

  e which was after the son of Zedekiah

  e for the Lord

E d did bring Mulek

  c into the land north,

  b and Lehi

a into the land south.

D And behold, there was all manner of gold in both these lands, and of silver, and of precious ore of every kind;

C and there were also curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it; and thus they did become rich.

B a They did raise grain in abundance,

  b both in the north and in the south;

a and they did flourish exceedingly, 

  b both in the north and in the south.

And they did multiply and wax exceedingly strong in the land. And they did raise many flocks and herds, yea, many fatlings. Behold their women did toil and spin, and did make all manner of cloth, of fine-twined linen and cloth of every kind, to clothe their nakedness.

A And thus the sixty and fourth year did pass away in peace.

**The Why**

“Since this chiasm encompasses the entire report for the year,” it’s likely that it was “a single literary unit that Mormon found on the large plates of Nephi.”\(^{17}\) Thus, recognizing chiasmus here reveals an underlying source in Mormon’s abridgement. Most remarkable, the parallel terms in the center are Lord and Zedekiah. In Hebrew, Zedekiah includes the suffix -yah, an abbreviated form of Yahweh (Jehovah/Lord). Thus, “the central chiastic structure in Helaman 6:10 actually would have worked better and would have been more obvious in Hebrew .... than in the English translation.”\(^{18}\)
Alma 29:1–7
The Know
Alma’s poetic reflections in Alma 29, likely coming on the cusp of a Jubilee year, are among some of the most parallel-laden passages in the entire Book of Mormon, including several examples of chiasmus. In the center of the chiastic structure of Alma 29:1–7 is the threefold repetition of an a-b-c pattern, creating a unique A-B-C-C-B-A outline for the overall structure, instead of the expected A-B-C-B-A structure. This double-layered repetition at the center strongly underscores the central message of this chiastic passage: that if we seek unrighteous desires in this life, we will also reap the undesirable consequences.

Chiastic Structure of Alma 29:1–7
A O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! … that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth.

B But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me.

C a I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life.

C a 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.

C a Yea, and I know that good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience.

B Now, seeing that I know these things, why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?

A Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak unto all the ends of the earth?

The Why
Maya Linguists have identified a very similar chiastic structure on Stela C at Quiriguá, which “talks about events that took place on the Creation date” and uses an A-B-C-C-B-A “chiasmic structure.” Furthermore, the three central elements (C lines) use three parallel statements in an a-b-c/a-b-c/a-c-b pattern, similar to the example in Alma 29. The only difference is that Stela C uses a change in sequence at the end to indicate the “peak event” or climax of the passage. The appearance of this unique chiastic arrangement in both the Book of Mormon and Maya hieroglyphic texts is but one of many examples which illustrate how well the Book of Mormon fits within ancient “America’s earliest known literary tradition.”

Quiriguá Stela C
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


11. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 376.


20. In Donald W. Parry, Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon, (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 298–299 every verse fits into a parallel structure, with two overarching chiasms in vv. 1–7 and 8–17, and additional chiasms in vv. 9, 9–10, 14–16.

