

Part 1

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**PARALLELISMS AND  
POETIC STRUCTURES**

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# CHIASMUS

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“bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20)

In recent years, one of the best-known forms of parallelism in the Bible has been chiasmus. Chiasmus is an inverted parallelism; it presents a series of words or ideas followed by a second presentation of similar words or ideas, but in reverse order.<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament has hundreds of chiasms (the book of Isaiah alone has more than one hundred),<sup>2</sup> varying in length from four lines to entire chapters (see, for example, 1 Kings 17–19).<sup>3</sup>

The following examples from the Bible and the Book of Mormon have been formatted to highlight their symmetry and to make them more readable. Key expressions are underlined to show their paired relationships.

Three examples of simple chiasms are found in Isaiah 5:20:

A Woe unto them that call evil

B good,

B and good

A evil;

A that put darkness  
 B for light,  
 B and light  
 A for darkness;

A that put bitter  
 B for sweet,  
 B and sweet  
 A for bitter!

Here the terms *evil* and *good* are presented once and then again in reverse order, a simple chiasitic inversion. The verse features two other simple chiasms based on *darkness/light* and *bitter/sweet*.

Another simple example is Isaiah 6:10:

A Make the heart of this people fat,  
 B and make their ears heavy,  
 C and shut their eyes;  
 C lest they see with their eyes,  
 B and hear with their ears,  
 A and understand with their heart.

The Book of Mormon contains more than three hundred instances of chiasmus,<sup>4</sup> each one unique, impactful, and inspiring.<sup>5</sup> This is a remarkable number. Second Nephi 9:20 is a beautifully simple chiasm about God's omniscience:

A For he knoweth  
 B all things,  
 B and there is not anything  
 A save he knows it.

While this example is very brief, it contains clear-cut parallelisms, is nicely balanced, and delivers a forceful testimony about the knowledge of God.

In only a few lines, Alma 34:10 features a chiasm that presents essential truth about Jesus's infinite and eternal sacrifice:

A there should be a great and last sacrifice;  
 B yea, not a sacrifice of man,  
 C neither of beast,  
 C neither of any manner of fowl;  
 B for it shall not be a human sacrifice;  
 A but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice.

Mosiah 3:18–19 gives us a chiasm focusing on Jesus Christ and his atoning blood:

A 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,

A chiasm may also present many corresponding elements, such as the following passage from Isaiah 60:1-3 (author's translation), which has an ABCDEFG // GFEDCBA pattern.

A <u>Arise</u> ,	קומי A
B <u>shine</u> ;	אורי B
C for thy <u>light</u> is come,	כי בא אורך C
D and the <u>glory</u>	וכבוד D
E of the <u>Lord</u>	יהוה E
F is <u>risen</u> upon thee.	עליך זרח F
G For, behold, the <u>darkness</u> shall cover the earth,	כי תנה החשך יכסה ארץ G
G and gross <u>darkness</u> the people:	וערפל לאמים G
F but shall <u>arise</u> upon thee,	ועליך יזרח F
E the <u>Lord</u>	יהוה E
D and his <u>glory</u> shall be seen upon thee,	וכבודו עליך יראה D
C and the nations shall come to thy <u>light</u>	והלכו גוים לאורך C
B and kings to the <u>brightness</u>	ומלכים לנגה B
A of thy <u>rising</u> .	זרחך A

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 atonement of Christ  
 the Lord,  
 B and becometh as a child,  
 A submissive, meek, humble . . .

Jesus Christ is clearly the focus of this passage, as can be seen by the use of the key expressions *atonement of Christ*, *Lord Omnipotent*, *God*, and *atonement of Christ the Lord*. This passage also gives prominence to six primary mirrored words and phrases: *humble/humble*, *children/child*, *atonement of Christ/atonement of Christ*, *natural man/natural man*, and *God/Holy Spirit*. As with all chiasmic passages, the message of these verses is greater than the creative arrangement of the words. But both together—the message and the presentation—produce a powerful impression on the reader.

Mosiah 2:5–6 provides another example of a chiasmic passage:

A And it came to pass that when they came up to the temple,  
 B they pitched their tents round about,  
 C every man according to his family,  
     D consisting of his wife, and his sons, and his daughters,  
     D and their sons, and their daughters, from the eldest  
     down to the youngest,  
 C every family being separate one from another.  
 B And they pitched their tents  
 A round about the temple.

On the surface this chiasm may not seem very profound, but it actually teaches an important truth about family togetherness—and about families centering themselves in the temple.

Why did biblical and Book of Mormon authors use chiasmus in their writings? For one thing, repetition of words in balanced, symmetrical structures encourages and enhances learning and memorization. Also, repetition of key points or themes emphasizes the crux of a prophetic mes-



## CHIASMUS: NOT JUST FOR THE ANCIENTS

The inverted parallel phrasings known as chiasmus did not just suddenly appear in full flower in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew literatures. Evidence suggests a progressive development from earlier times. For example, ancient Ugaritic and earlier Sumero-Akkadian texts contain chiasms, with even earlier use extending to Old Akkadian in the third millennium BC.\*

According to Bible scholar David Noel Freedman, “Chiasm occurs to one degree or another in most languages and literatures, though with varying frequencies and effects.”\*\*

We moderns are more familiar with this literary form than we might think. While technical terms like *chiasmus* and *antimetabole* (a kind of chiasmus) may not be part of our vernacular, we recognize a clever phrasal inversion when we hear one. In fact, chiasms abound in all kinds of popular discourse, from oft-quoted scripture to children’s books, political rhetoric, and song lyrics:

“But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.” —Matthew 19:30

“Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!”  
—William Shakespeare, *Othello* (1603)

“Love without end, and without measure Grace.”  
—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

“All for one, and one for all.” —Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Musketeers* (1884)

“I meant what I said, and I said what I meant.”  
—Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940)

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”  
—Anonymous

“Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” —John F. Kennedy, US President (1961)

“If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.” —Stephen Stills, American singer-songwriter, “Love the One You’re With” (1970)

\* See Robert F. Smith, “Chiasm in Sumero-Akkadian,” in Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*.

\*\* In preface to Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*.

sage. Finally, chiasmus encourages reading of important texts by making them aesthetically pleasing to the reader.

## Notes

1. See Welch, “Chiasm, Chiasmus,” 5:78. For an important examination of chiasmus in the ancient world, see Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*. For the significance of chiasmus, see Welch, “What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?”
2. For a list of chiastic structures in the book of Isaiah, including key words and scriptural references, see Parry, *Harmonizing Isaiah*, 257–65.
3. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland identified a chiasm spanning several chapters in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 11:8–18:39). See his book *Christ and the New Covenant*, 275.
4. As a young missionary, John W. Welch discovered examples of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, and in the decades since he has published a number of important articles on the topic; see the bibliography herein. For a study of chiasmus in Mesoamerican texts, see Christenson, “Chiasmus in Mesoamerican Texts.”
5. See Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon*. For a list of chiasms in the Book of Mormon, see the index of poetic forms on p. 565. A forthcoming paper of mine deals with chiasmus in the Hebrew Bible (specifically the Leningrad Codex) versus the Dead Sea Scrolls texts of Isaiah: “Chiasmus in the Text of Isaiah: MT Isaiah versus the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>),” in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, ed. Welch and Parry.