
RESUMPTIVE REPETITION

“yea, well did Mosiah say” (Alma 10:19)

In English, when we write a story that includes a parenthetical note, we typically use parentheses, commas, or dashes to set those words apart from the rest of the story. Likewise, biblical authors and editors regularly included parenthetical explanations, clarifying notes, or supplementary ideas in their narratives—although they did not use parentheses or punctuation marks to set them apart. Rather, they often used a technique wherein after a parenthetical note they would repeat a key phrase from the preceding portion of the story. Modern scholars call this literary form *resumptive repetition*.¹ According to biblical scholar Marc Brettler, “The Bible is full of repetitive resumptive, and no one has yet catalogued all of them.”²

An example of resumptive repetition is found in Exodus 6, where God commands Moses to speak to the pharaoh and Moses responds by saying, “How then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?” (verses 10–12). The author of the account then gives a multi-verse aside listing the genealogy of Israel’s first three tribes: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. After that aside, the narrative resumes with Moses asking the Lord, “Behold,

I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me?” (verse 30)—almost the exact words spoken in verse 12. This cue signals to the reader that the central story will resume. One scholar has likened this literary device to western movies from the silent-film era wherein the words “Meanwhile, back at the ranch . . .” appeared on the screen so viewers could better follow the story.³

In Genesis 37 the narrative detail that the “Midianites sold [Joseph] into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh’s, and captain of the guard” is followed by a long explanatory aside about Judah and Tamar. The writer then inserts the resumptive repetition “And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, . . . bought him of the hands of the Ishmeelites” (39:1).

A third example is from Exodus 14. Verse 22 reads, “And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.” Next comes a supplementary statement about the Egyptians who were pursuing the Israelites (see verses 23–28). Then verse 29 adds this resumptive repetition: “But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.”

Like its Hebrew counterpart, the Book of Mormon contains many instances of resumptive repetition.⁴ In his careful study of the subject, Royal Skousen documents more than one hundred examples.⁵ Here are a few examples from the Book of Mormon (the italicized words identify the key phrase that is repeated after the additional material is presented):

Yea, well did Mosiah say, who was our last king, when he was about to deliver up the kingdom, having no one to confer it upon, causing that this people should be governed by their own voices—*yea, well did he say* that if the time should come that the voice of the people should choose iniquity . . . (Alma 10:19)

And now, my beloved brethren, *if this be the case that these things are true* which I have spoken unto you, and God will show unto you, with power and great glory at the last day, that they are true, *and if they are true* has the day of miracles ceased? (Moroni 7:35)

And it came to pass that the Nephites who were not slain by the weapons of war, *after having buried those who had been slain*—now the number of the slain were not numbered, because of the greatness of their number—*after they had finished burying their dead* they all returned to their lands. (Alma 3:1)

For it came to pass in the commencement *of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah*, king of Judah, (my father, Lehi, having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days); and *in that same year* there came many prophets. (1 Nephi 1:4)

With this last example, the parentheses were not part of the original Book of Mormon text, but were added later so modern readers could clearly discern the supplementary material.

In some instances of resumptive repetition, the interludes are many verses long, such as the encounter between Amulek and Zeezrom in Alma 10. After the words “Now the object of these lawyers was to get gain; and they got gain according to their employ” (verse 32), a long interlude explains the relative values of Nephite silver and gold pieces. When Alma 11:20 resumes the main narrative, the first words recall where we left off: “Now, it was for the sole purpose to get gain, because they received their wages according to their employ.”

Helaman 5:6–13 gives us part of Helaman’s counsel to his sons. These words are framed with an introduction, “*For they remembered the words which their father Helaman spake unto them*” (verse 5), and then the resumptive repetition occurs several verses later, “*And they did remember his words*” (verse 14).

Knowing about resumptive repetition in the Bible and Book of Mormon can help us comprehend difficult, repetitive passages. That knowledge will also help us distinguish between the main point of a narrative and important explanatory asides. As David Bokovoy observes, “This literary technique is significant not only because it supports the authenticity of the Book of Mormon (the technique had not yet been identified by biblical scholars in 1830) but also because it allows readers to identify the primary message that the original writers of the Book of Mormon wanted their audience to receive.”⁶

Finally, in considering resumptive repetition in the Book of Mormon, “it should . . . be remembered that, according to eyewitnesses, Joseph orally dictated the Book of Mormon without using any notes or reference materials and without relying on his scribes to help him keep track of the flow of the narrative. Some instances of repetitive resumption come after rather lengthy asides, and it would have required remarkable focus and memory to recall the wording at the outset of each interjection.”⁷

Notes

1. For an analysis of resumptive repetition, see Alter’s introduction in *Literary Guide to the Bible*, 28–29; and Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, 155–56, 181–82.
2. Brettler, “Concluding Reflections,” <https://thetorah.com/the-resumptive-repetition/>. For a resumptive repetition in the Bible, see Long, “Repetitions in Biblical Historiography.”
3. See Farber, “Resumptive Repetition,” <https://thetorah.com/the-resumptive-repetition/>.
4. For popularized treatments of this topic, see Bokovoy and Tvedtnes, *Testaments*, 117–23; and Childs, “Epanalepsis in the Book of Mormon.”
5. See Skousen, *History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part 2*, 808–53.
6. Bokovoy, “Repetitive Resumption in the Book of Mormon,” 2.
7. BMC team, “Why Did Nephite Authors Use Repetitive Resumption?,” <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-did-nephite-authors-use-repetitive-resumption>.