

## Rethinking Alma 36

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Over the last fifty years, Alma chapter 36 has become famous among Book of Mormon readers because of its impressive chiastic structure as identified by John W. Welch. As it evolved over the following decades, Welch's analysis also attracted criticisms—mostly for its failure to include more than half of the text of the chapter in the proposed chiastic structure.

During this same time frame, students of the Hebrew Bible discovered and elaborated a rich rhetorical system evidenced in Hebrew literature from the eighth century BC and forward, a system that included chiasmus and many other devices based on repetition, parallelism, demarcation, and subordination and which reached the peak of its development about 600 BC.

I propose an application of this recently discovered system of Hebrew rhetoric to an analysis of Alma 36 that shows how every word in the chapter may be utilized meaningfully in its multilevel

structure, with chiasmus or reverse parallelism being one of the most frequently used forms.<sup>1</sup>

## Analyzing Alma 36

The following observations are offered before the presentation of the rhetorical analysis of the complete text of Alma 36 in the hope that it will make the analysis both more intelligible and more meaningful. A central claim underlying these observations is that the rhetorical structures and the doctrinal themes propounded by Alma to his son are so carefully woven together that the two must be interpreted simultaneously.

### Preliminary Observations

1. The most striking feature of the chiasm that organizes the text of Alma 36 is that the middle half of the chiasm employs reverse polarity between the parallel units of text. That is, beginning with the account of Alma's attempts to destroy the church of God in verse 6, each textual unit will parallel a later unit that negates or reverses some of its content and therefore does not just repeat the same phrases or sentences—as is the case in the framing half of the chiasm. This structural reversal strongly suggests that both the framing and the central halves of the chapter-length chiasm will convey additional messages of their own.
2. Negative parallelism is common in Hebrew rhetoric, especially in simple couplets where a contrast is presented. What has no precedent that I am yet aware of is the idea of constructing an entire half of a concentrically organized text using negative parallels. This rhetorical innovation allows Alma to divide up his message in

- a memorable way. He can use the first half to confirm the traditional promises of the Abrahamic covenant as applied both to biblical Israel and also to Lehi's branch—understood as prospering and protecting faithful Israel in this world's affairs. And then the second or central half can be devoted to his personal experience with the new covenant of Christ's gospel and the greater spiritual blessings it bestows on his repentant followers both in this life and in the next. This gospel requires every convert to turn back, reversing direction through repentance, in order to walk with God on the path he provides.
3. In the first half of that center section, Alma tells his own story of apostasy or rebellion against God. In the second, he proclaims the universal application of the gospel to whoever will listen and supports that proclamation by reference to the actual experience of the thousands who have been converted through his preaching. Point by point, the consequences of his sins are negated in parallel passages by the gospel blessings he and others experienced following repentance. In this way, Alma implicitly confirms the Book of Mormon idea that the promises given to Abraham will finally be realized through the gospel of Jesus Christ and the invitations and promises it offers to all men and women as individuals.<sup>2</sup>
  4. Alma uses the rhetorical structure itself and his own story as powerful demonstrations of the gospel principles he is teaching. The Hebrew word for repentance (*shub*) means to turn back—meaning to turn away from one's self-chosen paths back to the covenant path the Lord has prepared for his children. Both the chiasmic structure of the text and the personal history it recounts focus dramatically on repentance—on Alma's turning back from his wicked ways and the glorious consequences for himself and for others.

5. Alma places a factual reference to the atonement at the precise center of the chiasmic structure. The atonement is the decisive reality that makes it possible for men to abandon the ways of sin and turn back to the way of the Lord. The negative to positive flip that occurs at the structural center of the chiasm, where the atonement is first mentioned unobtrusively in an infinitive phrase, signals that it is this atonement of Christ that can replace the negatives of human life with eternal positives.<sup>3</sup>
6. The atonement reference in turn is framed by Alma's two explicit references to Jesus Christ, first remembering his father's teachings about Christ—and then appealing to Christ personally, trusting in him and in the effectiveness of his atonement.
7. The covenant that one makes in the process of repenting—to keep the commandments and take his name upon us—leads to the profound spiritual experience of being born again. That experience provides Alma and his converts with the divine knowledge, motivation, and ability to endure to the end faithfully.<sup>4</sup>
8. Alma opens and closes his long chiasm in the style of *inclusio* with nearly exact repetitions of language designed to catch the ear of most readers and to warn them to watch for more complex employment of Hebrew rhetoric in the rest of the passage. The noticeable variations in the repetitions at the end of the chapter will also warn the experienced reader of similar texts to watch for developments in the central and more complex portion of the text that will augment the meaning of the repeated phrases.

## Levels Analysis for Alma 36

Perhaps the most important advance in studies of Hebrew rhetoric over the last half century has been the discovery mentioned above that large rhetorical structures constitute text units, which are usually subdivided into further text units and so on, potentially through several levels of subordination. So the first step in rhetorical analysis is to find the boundary markers between text units at these various levels, starting at the top. In what follows I will first identify the seventeen principal rhetorical units (A–I, H'–A') that I find in Alma 36. I will then show how each of these is structured at various subordinate levels. I will refer to the full chapter composition as rhetorical level 1, and the seventeen units it divides into as level 2. It is at this level that the units are organized on a chiasmic principle. But most of these units contain their own subordinate units with their own rhetorical structures that can contain a further one or even two more subordinate levels, which will be identified as levels 3, 4, or, in one case, 5.

### The Larger Chiasmic Structure on Level 2

- A/A' "my word" = "his word" (36:1, 30)
- B/B' "that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land" (36:1, 30)
- C/C' remember "the captivity" of our fathers (36:2, 29)
- D/D' "trust in God" and be "supported in trials," "troubles," and "afflictions" (faith in Jesus Christ and enduring to the end; 36:3, 27)
- E/E' knowledge "of God" = "born of God" (36:4–5, 26)  
—PARALLEL BY NEGATION—
- F/F' "destroy the church of God" ≠ "bring souls unto repentance" (36:6, 24)
- G/G' "fell to the earth" ≠ "stood upon my feet" (36:7–11, 23)
- H/H' "that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God" ≠ "my soul did long to be there" (36:15, 22)

## —TURNING POINT—

I Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the world (36:17–18).

**Full Text Analysis of the Chiastic Pairings on Levels 3, 4, and 5**1<sup>5</sup> A My son, give ear to *my words*.30 A' Now this is according to *his word*.

The opening and closing lines of Alma 36 employ a simple inclusio to mark this chapter off as a separate unit of text within a larger section of the book of Alma.<sup>6</sup> The story that follows will tell us how Alma's words became the words of the Lord, as the variation in the phrase suggests.

This opening line is a salutation and invitation to listen or hear, which also becomes a repeated theme in the larger textual unit. This form recurs six times throughout the chapter, but the recurrences do not usually bear any structural weight. They do have their own rhetorical value in some occurrences, as will be noted below. Hebrew rhetoric also recognizes that Old Testament writers occasionally add a line at the end of a completed rhetorical structure as “ballast” to balance, complete, or summarize the thought.<sup>7</sup> The last line of Alma 36 (A') seems to perform that function.

Unlike many inclusions where the mere repetition of a term marks the boundaries of the text unit, the statements in which the repeated term is located here clearly signal their roles as beginning and ending statements for the passage—providing, in effect, doubled evidence of the intended boundary markers. But there is also a subtle shift of meaning from “my words” in the opening line and “his word” at the end of the passage. We might naturally assume that the intended meaning of “my words” simply calls our attention to the text that follows. But by setting this term up in parallel with “his word” we will come to realize that Alma is also signaling that this passage will

contain Alma's presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are multiple terms used for *gospel* in the Book of Mormon. In a 2013 study, I was able to establish the interchangeability of four terms for *gospel* in the Book of Mormon.<sup>8</sup> The most distinctive but least used is *doctrine*, referring to the doctrine of Christ, which occurs twenty-five times. More often, Book of Mormon writers use *gospel*—forty-two times referring to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Much less recognized but more frequent in the text, with eighty-two occurrences with this same meaning, is *the way*. As a variation on this, the gospel is referred to as *the path*, as in “straight and narrow path,” twenty-six times. But even more frequently the gospel is referred to as *the/his word*. Of the 962 occurrences of this term in the Book of Mormon, a full 278 seem to refer directly to the gospel message, including this concluding sentence of Alma 36. And so we can read the opening and closing lines of Alma 36 as references to the gospel of Jesus Christ as presented therein—and as featured in the central chiasm of the chapter.

**B**

- I    a    for I swear unto you  
       b    that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God,  
       c    ye shall prosper in the land.



**B'**

- 30    But behold, my son, this is not all.  
       a    For ye ought to know as I do know  
       b    that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God  
       c    ye shall prosper in the land;  
       a'    and ye had ought to know also  
       b'    that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God,  
       c'    ye shall be cut off from his presence.

It is interesting that B' uses the same triplet structure of B, making it parallel in both the content and the structure. But B' goes on to extend the parallel by adding a negative version of the same triplet

to teach Helaman the consequences of failing to keep the commandments. It is typical of Hebrew narrative and parallelism that a repetition with terminological variation can be used to extend or intensify the meaning of the first statement.<sup>9</sup>

Alma is quoting here from the promise that both Lehi (2 Nephi 1:20) and Nephi (1 Nephi 2:20–21) said they had received from the Lord. Its inherent ambiguity allows it to suggest a curse on a whole people (the Nephites or the Lamanites) or a curse on individuals who fail to keep the commandments, thus bringing the gospel perspective into a classic version of the Abrahamic covenant. Alma plays on that ambiguity by beginning and ending the chapter quoting this promise, which in its Nephite version seems to stand in as a surrogate for the Abrahamic covenant or the Lehite covenant as these have come down to the Nephites.<sup>10</sup> The traditional biblical interpretation of these covenants tends to measure “prospering” in terms of territorial independence, multiplying of descendants, and wealth. But in this chapter, Alma’s focus on the gospel and the atonement of Christ provides an eternal perspective to the concept of prospering, so that by the time we reach the end of the chapter, keeping the commandments and prospering in the land have taken on a far richer meaning than Israelites in Lehi’s day may have envisioned when reading Deuteronomy 29, and any perceived distance between the covenant of Abraham and the covenant of Christians will have evaporated completely.

### C

- 2 a I would that *ye should do as I have done in remembering the captivity of our fathers,*
- i for they were *in bondage*
- ii and *none could deliver them*
- iii except it were
- 1 the God of Abraham
- 2 and the God of Isaac
- 3 and the God of Jacob;



- ii' and he surely did deliver them
- i' in their afflictions.

C<sup>hi</sup>

- 28 i for he hath brought our fathers out of Egypt,
  - ii and he hath swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea;
  - iii and he led them by his power into the promised land;
- 
- i yea, and he hath delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time
  - 29 ii Yea, and he hath also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem,
  - i' and he hath also by his everlasting power delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time, even down to the present day.
  - a' And I have always retained in remembrance their captivity;
  - a" yea, and ye also had ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity. (ballast line)

## D

- 3 And now, O my son Helaman,
  - a behold, thou art in thy youth,
  - b and therefore I beseech of thee
  - c that thou wilt hear my words
  - d and learn of me,
- 
- a for I do know
  - b that whomsoever shall put his trust in God
  - c shall be supported in their trials and their troubles and their afflictions
  - d and shall be lifted up at the last day.

## D'

- 27 c' And I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions.

- i        Yea, God hath *delivered* me from prisons and from  
          bonds and from death.
- b'        Yea, and I do *put my trust in him*
- i               and he will still *deliver* me.
- 28 a'        And I *know*
- d'               that he *will raise me up at the last day*
- i                      to dwell with him in glory.
- Yea, and I will praise him forever. (ballast line)



## E

- 4 a        And I would not that ye think that I know of *myself*—
- b               not of the temporal but of *the spiritual*,
- c                      not of the carnal mind but of *God*.
- 5 c'        Now behold, I say unto you: If I had not been born of *God*,
- i               I should not have known these things.
- b'        But God hath *by the mouth of his holy angel* made these things  
          known unto me,
- a'        not of any worthiness of *myself*.



## E'

- 26 a        for because of *the word which he hath imparted unto me*,
- b               behold, *many hath been born of God*
- c                      and hath *tasted as I have tasted*
- c'                      and hath *seen eye to eye as I have seen*.
- b'        Therefore *they do know of these things* of which I have spoken  
          as I do know;
- a'        and *the knowledge which I have is of God*.

In E and E' Alma provides an explanatory preface for the personal conversion account that will follow. Again, the focus in each of these parallel chiasms is on knowledge of God and how men can gain that knowledge. While both E and E' are positively related, unlike the level-4 pairs of text units that will follow, by using *not* six times E does introduce the language of negative alternatives that will provide

the dynamic for the next three pairings. In this pairing, Alma uses parallel six-line chiasms to clarify that the testimony he bears, the knowledge he wants to share, is not of the temporal or carnal mind but is of God. In both chiasms, Alma connects his experience of being “born of God” with the knowledge “of God,” which he received “by the mouth of the holy angel” (Alma 36:4–5). The connections and format shared by these two passages are so strong that they could be read sequentially, out of their actual order, without any hint of discontinuity or interruption. Another important contribution of Welch’s 1989 paper was his analysis of “weaving factors” the author had devised to link contiguous text units together, to prepare the reader for changes in topic or language, and to make the whole text read smoothly and seamlessly and not bounce from one text unit to the next in a noticeable way.<sup>12</sup>

E begins and ends with Alma’s insistence that this special knowledge that he has received was not a result of his own effort or wisdom or of his own worthiness. Lines 2 and 5 clarify that this was not a temporal experience, but a spiritual one—for God made these things known to him by sending a holy angel. The two center lines equate this knowledge received of God with the experience of being born of God, as line Ec’i dips to level 4 to make that connection.

E’ makes the same linkages but goes on to show that through the word/knowledge given of God to Alma, many others have received the same knowledge, also being born of God. Here the center lines enigmatically expand the description of that experience by Alma’s reference to what he and they had “tasted” and that they had “seen eye to eye” (Alma 36:26). We know from verse 24 that it was “exceeding joy” that they had tasted. From verses 20 and 24 we know that Alma saw “marvelous light” and “God sitting upon his throne.”

The focus on the source of this knowledge is thematic throughout Alma 36. The very inclusio that marks the beginning and end of this literary unit equates “my word” with “his word”—Alma’s word with God’s—suggesting implicitly that the passage will teach us how

a man's word can become the word of God. In E and E' Alma makes it clear that his knowledge, his testimony, comes from being born of God, which in his case included being arrested and taught by an angel. E' describes the ripple effect of one person being born of God as he shares the word, or the gospel of Jesus Christ, which enables others to have the same experience—gaining the same knowledge, tasting the joys of the Spirit, and seeing the things he has seen.

## F

- 6 a For I went about with the sons of Mosiah seeking to destroy the church of God.  
 b But behold, God sent his holy angel to stop us by the way.  
 7 c And behold, he spake unto us as it were the voice of thunder,  
 c' and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet.  
 b' And we all fell to the earth,  
 a' for the fear of the Lord came upon us.



## F'

- 24 a Yea, and from that time even until now I have *labored* without ceasing  
 b that I might bring *souls unto repentance*,  
 c that I might bring them *to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste*,  
 c' that they might also *be born of God*  
 b' and *be filled with the Holy Ghost*.  
 25 a' Yea, and now behold, O my son, the Lord doth give me exceeding great joy in the fruits of my *labors*;

F and F' mark the beginning and conclusion of the central section or second half of the chiastic organization of Alma 36 where the principal parallels will be negative. Their efforts to destroy the church described in F will be transformed, and they “labored without ceasing” to bring others to repentance and to taste the joy they have tasted, to be born of God, to be filled with the Holy Ghost (Alma

36:24). Because of the negations of F in F', there is little direct parallel in the details and wording of the before and after story.

Both F and F' can be analyzed as similar six-line chiasms. Both rely more on related meanings (positive and negative) than they do on word repetitions to signal their chiasmic structure. In F, Alma describes how he and the sons of Mosiah (not fearing God) went about destroying the church of God. F ends as the “fear of God” overcomes them. The coming of the angel to stop them is paired with their being effectively stopped and falling “to the earth” (Alma 36:7). The thunderous voice of the angel is paired with the trembling of the earth.

F', like Alma 36 itself, has the virtue of being marked off as an *inclusio*, with the same term (*labor*) being emphasized in the opening and closing sentences. But the line pairings of the chiasm depend more on equivalent meanings, as in F, than on repeated terms. The first and last lines refer to Alma’s labors as a teacher of the gospel. The other two-line pairs make the links in convert experience—between repentance and being filled with the Holy Ghost in the second pair, and between being born of God and tasting exceeding joy in the third pair. At the beginning, F provides an implicit contrast between the mission of the angel and that of Alma and his associates. The full story of F and F' illustrates the reverberating power of witness as the angel’s witness to Alma spurs his witness to those he converts, who in turn convey the same testimony to others.

## G

- 8 But behold,  
 a *the voice said unto me: Arise.*  
 b And I arose and stood up and beheld the angel.  
 9 c And he said unto me: *If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God.*  
 10 d And it came to pass that I fell to the earth; and it was for the space of three days and three nights that I could not open my mouth, neither had I the use of my limbs.

- 11 e                   And the angel spake more things unto me, *which were*  
                           *heard by my brethren,*  
 e'                    *but I did not hear them.*  
 d'                   For when I heard the words, if thou wilt be destroyed of  
                           thyself, seek no more to destroy the church of God, *I was*  
                           *struck with such great fear and amazement*  
 c'                    lest perhaps *that I should be destroyed*  
 b'                    that *I fell to the earth*  
 a'                    and *I did hear no more.*



### G'

- 23 a   But behold, my limbs did receive their strength again,  
 b       and I stood upon my feet  
 c       and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God.

G and G' continue the pattern of negation in the overall chiasm of Alma 36. Three of the five sets of parallel lines in G (a/a', b/b', and e/e') are parallel by negation (Alma 36:11). In Ga Alma hears a voice, and in Ga' he "did hear no more." In Gb he stands up, and in Gb' he falls "to the earth." In Gc the angel threatens Alma with personal destruction, and in Gc' he expresses his fear of being destroyed. In Gd he describes being paralyzed for three days, and in Gd' he explains the paralysis saying that he "was struck with such great fear and amazement." In Ge Alma reports that his brethren heard other things the angel said, but in Ge' he clarifies that he personally "did not hear them." G' reverses the major developments of G as Alma regains his strength, stands up, and manifests his new spiritual status—being born of God. While G presents a ten-element chiasm, G' is a simple triplet, demonstrating again that thematically parallel units of a chiasm do not need to display the same rhetorical structures in their subunits.

## H

- 12 a But I was *racked with eternal torment*,  
 i for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree  
 ii and racked with all my sins.
- 13 b Yea, I did remember all *my sins and iniquities*,  
 i for which I was tormented with the pains of hell.  
 c Yea, I saw that *I had rebelled against my God*  
 i and that *I had not kept his holy commandments*.  
 14 ii Yea, and *I had murdered many of his children—*  
 iii or rather led them away unto destruction—  
 c' yea, and in fine, so *great had been my iniquities*  
 i that the very thoughts of coming into the presence of  
 my God  
 ii did rack my soul with inexpressible horror.
- 15 b' O, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct, both  
 soul and body,  
 i that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God  
 ii to be judged *of my deeds*.
- 16 a' And now for three days and for three nights was I *racked, even with  
 the pains of a damned soul*.



## H'

- 20 a And O what joy and *what marvelous light I did behold!*  
 b Yea, *my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pains*.
- 21 c Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there can be *nothing so  
 exquisite and so bitter as was my pains*.  
 b' Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand  
 there can be *nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy*.
- 22 a' Yea, and methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, *God sitting  
 upon his throne*,  
 i surrounded with numberless concourses of angels  
 ii in the attitude of singing and praising their God.  
 Yea, and my soul did long to be there. (ballast line)

The pairing of H and H' presents the most vivid parts of the reversal between the two halves of the central chiasm. The presentation in H may be more difficult to sort out rhetorically because so many of the level-3 elements are themselves units that have their own internal rhetorical structures at level 4. Ha, Hc, Hc', and Hb' are all triplets which have their own internal structure. If we are not using levels analysis, these can easily look like extra text, even though they are clearly relevant to the larger story. H is a longish six-element chiasm as it dips four times into the fourth level of rhetorical organization. But once these level shifts are recognized, H is relatively easy to sort out because it does depend on straightforward repetitions of terms or concepts in its level-3 chiastic structure. In a/a' Alma reports how he was "racked" with "eternal torment" or "the pains of a damned soul" (Alma 36:12, 16). In b/b' he reports how the memory of his "sins and iniquities" tormented him—how he feared to be judged "of [his] deeds" (36:13, 15). In c/c' he confesses that "he had rebelled against" his God, "so great had been [his] iniquities" (36:13–14). In the level-4 additions through second and third lines of triplets, we learn that Alma's "soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree," that because he "had not kept his holy commandments"; "the very thoughts of coming into the presence of [his] God" at the judgment did rack his soul "with inexpressible horror" (36:12–14). These are phrases and concepts introduced at the fourth level that Alma can now employ in further level-3 parallels.

The five-element chiasm of H' features the reversal of the pains and guilt that are so forcibly expressed in H. The "marvelous light" that Alma beholds in Ha corresponds to his vision in H'a that he thought he saw of "God sitting upon his throne" (Alma 36:20, 22). In Hb the pains are gone and his "soul was filled with joy" (36:20). Hb' intensifies that description, saying "there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy" (36:21). Hc provides the central turning point with language that reflects back to Hb and forward to Hb'. While emphasizing the exceeding level of the pains reported in Hb he calls them "exquisite and so bitter," setting up the language for the



description of his newly received joy, stating that “there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy” (36:21). The b/c/b' sequence in H' has the interesting feature that each of the lines has some phrasing in common with each of the other two lines. Exceeding joy in b links to exquisite and sweet joy in b'. But b and c are linked by “my pains” (36:20–21). And c and b' share “can be nothing so exquisite and [so bitter/sweet]” (36:21).

At the end of H', Alma adds another ballast line—that in seeing this vision of God's throne his soul did long to be there, negating and balancing the comment in Hb'i that he feared to be brought into the presence of God and simultaneously providing the common element linking H and H' on level 2, while maintaining the negating character of this section of the level-3 chiasm.

In H' the first and last lines are both reporting what Alma saw. In H'a' we learn that the “marvelous light” of H'a (Alma 36:20) was the vision of the heavenly council referred to in other passages where the heavens open and the prophet receives his call. It would appear that Alma has subsequently discovered 1 Nephi 1:8 and in writing up chapter 36, uses it as a validation of his own experience. As Welch observed in 1991, Alma inserts this quotation from 1 Nephi 1:8, which is the longest verbatim quotation of one person by another in the Book of Mormon.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, if we can assume that his audience would be familiar with the sentence following the one he has quoted from verse 8 in which we learn that Lehi also saw Jesus Christ “descending out of the midst of heaven” whose luster “was above that of the sun at noonday” (1 Nephi 1:9), we would understand that Alma shares the same concept of the Father and the Son that Nephi displays in this passage and more explicitly in 2 Nephi 31. Combined with Alma's invocation of the divine names as discussed above, we can see Alma teaching an extraordinarily clear understanding of Jesus Christ over half a century before Christ's birth.

## I

- 17 a And it came to pass that as I was thus *racked with torment*,  
 i while I was *harrowed up by the memory of my many sins*,  
 b behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto  
 the people  
 i concerning the coming of one *Jesus Christ, a Son of God*,  
 ii to atone for the sins of the world.
- 
- 18 b' Now as my mind *catched hold upon this thought*,  
 i I cried within my heart: *O Jesus, thou Son of God*,  
 ii have mercy on me,  
 1 who art in *the gall of bitterness*  
 2 and art *encircled about by the everlasting chains of death*.
- 19 a' And now behold, when I thought this, I *could remember my pains*  
*no more*.  
 i Yea, I was *harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more*.

The remaining text at the center of Alma 36 is presented as a single, complex, level-3 chiasm—the two halves of which define the narrative center of the level-2 text unit at the same time that it instantiates repentance, the focal doctrine of the chapter. This powerful convergence at the turning point of the larger level-2 chiasm is focused in this level-3 abb'a' chiasm. Both a and a' include a fourth-level element that recalls Alma's being "harrowed up by the memory of [his] sins" (Alma 36:17). Both b and b' begin with a mental action of remembering or catching hold of the same thought. But the main content and action is pushed down to the fourth and fifth rhetorical levels of the text. After remembering the prophecy that Jesus will come "to atone for the sins of the world," Alma cried to Jesus in his heart, pleading for the mercy that the atonement enables and articulating the extremity of his need, being "in the gall of bitterness" and "encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (36:17–18). Because the central invitation or command of Christ's gospel is that all men must repent and come unto him, this central narrative unit

provides an autobiographical account of just such a turning back to God at exactly the point where the rhetorical structure turns back. All that has been stated negatively will now be replaced by wonderful positives. And this miraculous event or turning from extreme wickedness to righteousness is only to be understood in terms of the central infinitive phrase referring to the atonement of Christ. This powerful conjunction of rhetorical form, personal transformation, and doctrinal teaching establishes Alma 36 as one of the greatest literary gems of the Book of Mormon.

It is also worth noting how the almost casual indirection of “*one Jesus Christ, a Son of God*” in Alma’s distant memory provides dramatic contrast to the intensely personalized and immediate “*O, Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me*” (Alma 36:17–18; emphasis added). Can anything be more personal than our sins? The vast distance that Alma had long maintained between himself and God collapses completely in this desperate plea for mercy. As the chiasm in Alma 36 dips here for the first and only time to level 5 to explain his reversal and prayer for mercy, we see Alma self-described as “in the gall of bitterness” and “encircled about by the everlasting chains of death” (36:18)—a realization that motivates true and lasting repentance.

## Conclusions

This paper introduces students of the Book of Mormon to the tools of analysis that have been developing in recent decades in the study of seventh- and eighth-century Hebrew rhetoric. Scholars now recognize that much of the Hebrew writing in Lehi’s day used the rhetorical assumptions and expectations of this writing school in order to communicate meaning more powerfully through both words and textual structure. The principal innovations are based in the recognition that larger texts are divided into discrete smaller texts, which in turn can be divided again and again into multiple subordinate levels of textual units. Each of those units at the different levels will

have its own rhetorical structure. Most of these structures feature one or more forms of parallelism or repetition. While criticisms of published chiastic analyses of Alma 36 have pointed to large sections of text that are not readily included in the traditional chiastic analysis of that chapter based mostly on word and phrase repetitions, application of the tools of Hebrew rhetoric reveal a chiastic structure that appears to be fully organized at subordinate levels, leaving no extra text unaccounted for in the analysis. The resulting analysis also reveals a powerful work of art in which literary structure, gospel teaching, and narrated repentance experience converge in a fully integrated and mutually supporting way. The merging of Lehi's version of the Abrahamic-covenant promises for this world with Alma's own account of the eternal-world promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly indicates that Alma—and most likely other Nephites—understood these as two ways of talking about the same thing. And the explicit appeal to the atonement of Jesus Christ at the precise rhetorical center of the chapter-length chiasm emphasizes its essential role in God's plan of salvation for individuals and nations.

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## Notes

1. Because of space constraints for this Sperry Symposium volume, the history of criticism of Alma 36 will not be included. Nor will I review here the summary descriptions of Hebrew rhetoric and its potential applications to Book of Mormon interpretation that I have published previously. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 91–98; and "Chiastic

Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in *To Seek the Law of the Lord: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 333–49. The same constraints required the deletion of the commentary and explanation of two of the nine levels of analysis of this text, but, courtesy of the BYU Library, the prepublication version of the complete paper is available online at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2104/>.

2. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 39–79.
3. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49–78.
4. As Alma explains in his nonchiastic rehearsal of the same story and principles to his second son Shiblon, “blessed is he that endureth to the end” (Alma 38:2).
5. The verse numbers of the 1981 Latter-day Saint edition are provided in the left margin for the reader’s convenience. The text of Alma 36 and other quotations of the Book of Mormon are taken from the Yale critical text: Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Italics are added in quotations to signal key terminology.
6. For a helpful explanation of inclusio, the history of this usage in studies of biblical rhetoric, and biblical examples of its use, see Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 325–27.
7. Lundbom borrows the concept of ballast lines from James Muilenburg and George Adam Smith and illustrates the form these took in Isaiah in *Biblical Rhetoric*, 133–35. Alma produces the same effect with simpler and briefer constructions.
8. See Noel B. Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 75–79.
9. Robert Alter used Psalm 13 to illustrate this typical pattern in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 62–64.

10. For a detailed analysis of the three streams of covenant discourse maintained throughout the Book of Mormon, see Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant."
11. As noted earlier, the commentary for this section of the paper and the next (C and C', D and D') are only available in the online version due to space constraints. See <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2104>.
12. John W. Welch, 1989, 24–25. The full 1989 paper "Chiasmus in Alma 36" by John W. Welch can be readily accessed at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/PreliminaryReports/Scanned%20Set%201/John%20W%20Welch,%20Chiasmus%20in%20Alma%2036,%201989.pdf>.
13. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 126.