

LITERARY PARALLELISM

One of the great discoveries of biblical scholarship in the late eighteenth century was that much of the Hebrew Bible is written in poetic form.¹ This is true not only of Job, Psalms, and the Song of Solomon but also of the prophets. The books of Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Micah consist almost entirely of poetry, as does about half of Jeremiah. Poetry is an exceptionally powerful and memorable mode of communication, and these qualities made it appropriate for representing the word of God. The characteristic forms of Hebrew poetry, however, are somewhat different from the rhymes and rhythms that are familiar to us from English verse.² Hebrew poetry is based on parallelism within couplets or, less commonly, triplets, which are related either grammatically or semantically. Grammatical parallelism can be recognized by similar syntactic structures for successive lines, while semantic parallelism occurs when an idea is rephrased, reformulated, or developed from line to line.

Of the two, semantic parallelism is more likely to be carried over in a translation. For example, Amos 5.24 states:

But let judgment run down as waters,
and righteousness as a mighty stream.

Here the *judgment* (meaning “justice”) of line 1 parallels the *righteousness* of line 2, and the phrase *run down as waters* corresponds with *as a mighty stream*. Two more parallel couplets in quick succession occur at Isaiah 49.22:

I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles,
and set up my standard to the people;
and they shall bring thy sons in their arms,
and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders.

The writings of the prophets are much easier to understand when the English renditions of poetic passages are arranged so that they reflect the underlying poetic structure. Indeed, most modern translations of the Bible do this. It is easier to follow the prophets’ thoughts and arguments if we know where to expect repetition and where to look for

¹ The key study was Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, first published in Latin in 1753 and then in an English translation in 1787. ² The exact contours of the literary genre have generated a tremendous amount of commentary, with scholarly disagreements that continue into the present. For brief introductions to Hebrew poetry, with extensive bibliographies, see Adele Berlin, “Parallelism,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:155–62; and Fred W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Poetry, Hebrew,” in the *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 4:550–58.

Single-volume introductions include James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield, Eng.: JSOT Press, 1984); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001); and F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

new ideas. In this edition of the Book of Mormon, the lengthy excerpts from Isaiah that appear in 1 and 2 Nephi are presented in poetic form, but there are other sections of the Book of Mormon that also exhibit Hebrew-style parallelism, and these have similarly been arranged into lines and stanzas. While there are still many uncertainties about the Nephite language, reformed Egyptian (Mormon 9.32), and the nature of the translation, it is not surprising that when Book of Mormon prophets wished to give particular emphasis to their message, they often employed the techniques of Hebrew poetry. In fact, characteristic biblical patterns of parallelism can be illustrated with examples from the Book of Mormon.

Hebrew parallelism often involves more than a simple repetition of words or ideas; frequently the second line adds to or intensifies the first. As Adele Berlin has explained:

The meaning of the lines is somehow related: perhaps synonymous, perhaps reflecting the converse or reverse, or perhaps extending the meaning in any one of a number of ways. Equivalence does not imply identity. The second line of a parallelism rarely repeats exactly the same words or exactly the same thought as the first; it is more likely to echo, expand or intensify the idea in the first line in any one of a number of ways.³

Earlier scholars identified four basic types of parallelism in Hebrew poetry: (1) synonymous, (2) antithetic, (3) synthetic, and (4) climactic. Each of these also appears in the Book of Mormon.

The two biblical examples above utilize *synonymous parallelism*, where the second line restates the meaning of the first. Similarly, King Benjamin begins his address with this command:

Open your ears that ye may hear,
and your hearts that ye may understand.
(Mosiah 2.9)

Sometimes the restatement is more specific than the initial assertion:

Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh;
my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.
(2 Ne 4.17)

Antithetic parallelism occurs when the second line repeats the thought of the first, but in opposite terms, as when Abinadi describes the children of Israel as

and how quick to do iniquity,
and how slow to do good
(Helaman 12.4)

³ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2186.

Jacob employs the same device at Jacob 6.3:

And how blessed are they who have labored diligently in his vineyard,
and how cursed are they who shall be cast out into their own place!

In *synthetic parallelism*, the second line does not express the same idea in different words or provide a contrast; rather, it completes the thought of the first line. We see this in 1 Nephi 17.35:

Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one;
he that is righteous is favored of God.

We see it again at Mormon 6.17:

O ye fair ones,
how could ye have rejected that Jesus,
who stood with open arms to receive you!

In *climactic parallelism*, a word or phrase is repeated in successive lines along with additional information that carries forward the meaning. King Benjamin's aphorism about service is memorable in part because it is an example of climactic parallelism:

When ye are in the service of your fellow beings,
ye are only in the service of your God.
(Mosiah 2.17)

Another example occurs at Alma 37.35:

O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth;
yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.

And, with even more repetition, at 2 Nephi 33.6:

I glory in plainness;
I glory in truth;
I glory in my Jesus,
for he hath redeemed my soul from hell.

As can be seen from the last example, parallel patterns may include more than two lines, and various types of parallels may be combined. Returning to the last example, lines 1 through 3 are climactic, with line 4 adding a synthetic parallel. This can also be seen when Ammon exclaims:

But behold, my joy is full,
yea, my heart is brim with joy,
and I will rejoice in my God.
(Alma 26.11)

There is synonymous parallelism between lines 1 and 2, and synthetic parallelism between lines 2 and 3.

So far we have examined only the relationships between individual lines, but couplets may themselves be parallel. One of the most famous passages of the Book of Mormon features a double antithetic parallelism:

Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments
ye shall prosper in the land;
but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments
ye shall be cut off from my presence.

(2 Nephi 1.20)

The synthetic parallelism within the two couplets is augmented by the antithetic parallelisms between lines 1 and 3, 2 and 4.

The relationships between various lines and couplets can sometimes become quite complex, ranging from the antithesis of the last example to repeated order:

a) Yea, blessed is the name of my God,
b) who has been mindful of this people,
 who are a branch of the tree of Israel,
c) and has been lost from its body in a strange land;
a) yea, I say, blessed be the name of my God,
b) who has been mindful of us,
c) wanderers in a strange land.

(Alma 26.36)

to reverse order (or chiasmus):

a) And he will take upon him their infirmities,
b) that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh,
b) that he may know according to the flesh
a) how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

(Alma 7.12)

One of the earliest passages in the Book of Mormon to be identified as poetry was the so-called psalm of Nephi (2 Nephi 4.16–35), which was given that title by Sidney Sperry in 1947.⁴ In the 1980s there were several articles in Church magazines on Book of Mormon poetry, with Richard Rust making additional contributions in the 1990s, particularly with his chapter on poetry in *Feasting on the Word*.⁵ During those same decades a much larger

⁴ Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1947), 110–11. On the next page, Sperry designated Mormon 6.17–22 as “Mormon’s Lamentation,” and he rearranged both passages into poetic lines. The chapter in which this discussion appeared was reprinted as “Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon: Epistles, Psalms, Lamentations,” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 1 (1995): 69–80.

⁵ Richard Dilworth Rust, “Book of Mormon Poetry,” *New Era*, March 1983, 46–50; Paul Cracroft, “A Clear Poetic Voice,” *Ensign*, January 1984, 28–31; Richard Dilworth Rust, “Poetry in the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 100–113; and Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997).

and more detailed scholarly conversation was taking place concerning Hebraic-style parallelism in the Book of Mormon (including chiasmus), but even though Hebrew poetry employs parallelism, the topics are not synonymous.⁶ Prose can be organized according to parallelistic patterns, as with the chiasmic structure of Alma 36. Indeed, Donald Parry's reformatted edition of the Book of Mormon finds parallelism on most pages, though relatively few passages, aside from the borrowed chapters of Old Testament prophets, could formally be considered as poetry.⁷

For this study edition, I have set several passages into poetic form. My editorial decisions are, of course, tentative given that the Book of Mormon is literature in translation. But in general, when I encountered passages that exhibited heightened emotion, repetition, and parallel phrases that were both grammatically uncomplicated and relatively short, I set them into poetic lines.⁸ Considerations of context, striking imagery, and larger patterns of repetition and parallelism extending across couplets were also taken into account. I used indentation to arrange the passages into couplets, triplets, and occasionally stanzas. It is easier to grasp the meaning of complicated rhetorical writing if the basic repetitive elements are lined up and the main points come at predictable intervals. If I have been successful, the poetic passages should both read smoothly and also call attention to themselves.

Many Latter-day Saints consider the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon to be one of the most subtle and persuasive evidences of its ancient origins. Chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, is an ancient literary technique in which a sequence of parallel words or ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. It occurs regularly in the Bible, in both poetry and prose, though the feature is often obscured by translation. A simple example can be found at Mark 2.27, in an a b b' a' order:

[a] The sabbath was [b] made for man, and [b'] not man [a'] for the sabbath.

A longer example occurs at Isaiah 6.10:

⁶ See John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981; repr., Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999); John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 33–52; Donald W. Parry, "Hebrew Literary Patterns in the Book of Mormon," *Ensign*, October 1989, 58–61; Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 15–81; John W. Welch, "What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 199–224; and Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999). ⁷ Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007). The introduction to Parry's volume offers the most sophisticated analysis of Book of Mormon parallelism written to date. ⁸ A few passages have been divided into lines not because they are poetry, but because they exhibit rhetorical repetition (such as the three consecutive sentences at Alma 5.6 that begin "Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance . . .") or because they are lists (as with the genealogy at Ether 1.7–32).

- 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**.

In other cases, chiasms may stretch over several verses.

The Book of Mormon contains numerous examples of relatively short chiasms, such as at 1 Nephi 17:31 (which illustrates that the various elements are not necessarily repetitions; parallels can be synonymous or antithetic as well):

- a) And according to **his word**
- b) he did **do all things** for them;
- b') and there was **not any thing done**
- a') save it were by **his word**.

A chiasmic pattern can also be discerned in the familiar words of Moroni 10.4–5:

- a) He will manifest **the truth** of it unto you,
- b) **by the power of the Holy Ghost**.
- b') And **by the power of the Holy Ghost**
- a') ye may know **the truth** of all things.

Shorter, simpler chiasms can be part of a rhetorical style found in extemporaneous sermons and other forms of oral discourse. Longer, more elaborate chiasms are more likely to be the result of deliberately crafted, written composition. Here are four famous examples, adapted from the work of John W. Welch:

1. Mosiah 3:18–19

- Men drink damnation to their own souls except
- a) they **humble** themselves
 - b) and **become as little children**
 - c) and believe that salvation . . . is . . . in and through the **atonement** 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 **atonement** of **Christ the Lord**
 - b') and **becometh as a child**,
 - a') submissive, meek, **humble** . . .

2. Mosiah 5.10–12

- a) And now . . . 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 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 would that ye should remember** to retain the name . . .
- c') 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.

3. Chiasms can have additional twists and turns, as in Alma 41.13–15:

- a) My son, . . . the meaning of **the word restoration** is
- b) to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—
- c) **good** for that which is good,
- d) **righteous** for that which is righteous,
- e) **just** for that which is just,
- f) **merciful** for that which is merciful. Therefore, my son,
- f') see that you are **merciful** unto your brethren.
- e') deal **justly**,
- d') judge **righteously**,
- c') and do **good** continually. And if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward; yea,
- f'') ye shall have **mercy** restored unto you again;
- e'') ye shall have **justice** restored unto you again;
- d'') ye shall have a **righteous** judgment restored unto you again;
- c'') 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.

4. A chiasm can also give form to a whole chapter, as in Alma 36:

- a) My son, give ear to my **words** (verse 1)
- b) **Keep the commandments** and ye shall **prosper in the land** (1)
- c) Do as **I** have done (2)
- d) **Remember the captivity** of our fathers (2)
- e) They were in **bondage** (2)
- f) He surely did **deliver** them (2)
- g) **Trust** in God (3)
- h) Supported in **trials, troubles, and afflictions** (3)
- i) **Lifted up at the last day** (3)
- j) **I know** this not of myself but **of God** (4)
- k) **Born of God** (5)
 - l) I sought to destroy the church (6–9)
 - m) My **limbs** were paralyzed (10)
 - n) Fear of being in the **presence of God** (14–15)
 - o) **Pains** of a damned soul (16)
 - p) **Harrowed up by the memory of sins** (17)
 - q) I remembered **Jesus Christ, a Son of God** (17)
 - q') I cried, **Jesus, Son of God** (18)
 - p') **Harrowed up by the memory of sins** no more (19)
 - o') Joy as exceeding as was the **pain** (20)
 - n') Long to be in the **presence of God** (22)
 - m') My **limbs** received strength again (23)
 - l') I labored to bring souls to repentance (24)
 - k') **Born of God** (26)
 - j') Therefore the **knowledge which I have is of God** (26)
 - h') Supported under **trials, troubles, and afflictions** (27)
 - g') **Trust** in him (27)
 - f') He will **deliver** me (27)
 - i') and **raise me up at the last day** (28)
 - e') As God brought our fathers out of **bondage** and captivity (28–29)
 - d') Retain in **remembrance their captivity** (29)
 - c') Know as **I** do know (30)
 - b') **Keep the commandments** and ye shall **prosper in the land** (30)
 - a') This is according to his **word** (30)⁹

⁹This is Welch's outline from "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in Sorenson and Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 114–31. For more details on Book of Mormon chiasmus, see two additional articles by John W. Welch: "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 1–14; and "How Much Was Known about Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon Was Translated?," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 47–80.

The study of Book of Mormon rhetoric, which relies heavily on parallelism, is still in its infancy. Much more work could be done in identifying, categorizing, and analyzing literary patterns such as repetitions, figurative language, quotations, allusions, and *inclusios*, particularly when these occur across several chapters or even books, as opposed to within a single passage or pericope. A few characteristic examples of literary parallelism have been highlighted in the notes to this study edition; readers are encouraged to discover more on their own.