

What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 3

“O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.” Alma 36:18

Editor’s Note: This is part our on-going series on chiasmus, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of its discovery in the Book of Mormon. Be sure to check out our other KnowWhys on chiasmus and the Chiasmus Resources website for more information.

KnoWhy #355
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My son give ear to my words (v. 1)
Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (v. 1)
Do as I have done (v. 2)
Remember the captivity of our fathers (v. 2)
They were in bondage (v. 2)
He surely did deliver them (v. 2)
Trust in God (v. 3)
Support in trials, troubles, and afflictions (v. 3)
Lifted up at the last day (v. 3)
I know this not of myself but of God (v. 4)
Born of God (v. 5)
I sought to destroy the church (vv. 6–9)
My limbs were paralyzed (v. 10)
Fear of being in the presence of God (vv. 14–15)
Pains of a damned soul (v. 16)
Harrowed up by the memory of sins (v. 17)
I remembered Jesus Christ, a son of God (v. 17)
I cried, Jesus Christ, son of God (v. 18)
Harrowed by the memory of sins no more (v. 19)
Joy as exceeding as was the pain (v. 20)
Long to be in the presence of God (v. 22)
My limbs received strength again (v. 23)
I labored to bring souls to repentance (v. 24)
Born of God (v. 26)
Therefore my knowledge is of God (v. 26)
Supported under trials, troubles, and afflictions (v. 26)
Trust in him (v. 27)
He will deliver me (v. 27)
And raise me up at the last day (v. 28)
As God brought our fathers out of bondage and captivity (vv. 28–29)
Retain a remembrance of their captivity (v. 29)
Know as I do know (v. 30)
Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (v. 30)
This according to his word (v. 30)

Image via Book of Mormon Central

In the last fifty years, hundreds of chiasms from the Book of Mormon have been proposed and studied.¹ 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.”² 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 present 10 of the most interesting chiasms in the Book of Mormon. Seven were

presented over the last two weeks,³ and now we present the final three. 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.⁴

1 Nephi 4:4–27

The Know

Nephi’s use of chiasmus “is that of a sophisticated literary technician.”⁵ One of the most chiasmic sections of Nephi’s writings is the brass plates narrative. A chiasmic pattern for all of 1 Nephi 3–5 has been proposed,⁶ and nine other chiasms have been found throughout this story.⁷ Of those, this is the longest and most complex, and it encompasses the most central event of the brass plates narrative: killing Laban and getting the plates.

Chiastic Structure of 1 Nephi 4:4–27

A nevertheless they did follow me up until we came **without the walls** of Jerusalem. ... and I caused that they should hide themselves **without the walls**. (v. 4–5)

B I, Nephi, crept into the city and went forth towards the **house of Laban**. ... as I came near unto the **house of Laban** I beheld a man ... it was Laban. (v. 5–8)

C I beheld his **sword**, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof (v. 9)

D I was constrained by the **Spirit** that I should kill Laban. ... And the **Spirit** said unto me again: (v. 10–11)

E Behold **the Lord hath delivered him** into thy hands. ... Slay him, for **the Lord hath delivered him** into thy hands. (v. 11–12)

F It is better that one man should **perish** than that a nation should dwindle and **perish** in unbelief. (v. 13)

G Inasmuch as thy seed shall **keep my commandments**, they shall prosper in the land of promise. (v. 14)

G Yea, and I also thought that they could not **keep the commandments** of the Lord ... save they should have the law. (v. 15)

F And I also knew that the law was **engraven** upon the plates of brass. (v. 16)

E I knew that **the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands** for this cause (v. 17)

D Therefore I did obey the voice of the **Spirit** (v. 18)

C and I smote off his head with his own **sword**. ... I had smitten off his head with his own **sword** (v. 18–19)

B I took the **garments of Laban** ... went forth unto the **treasury of Laban** ... I saw the **servant of Laban** ... in the **voice of Laban** ... his master, **Laban** ... as if it had been **Laban**. (v. 19–23)

A to my elder brethren, who were **without the walls**. ... who were **without the walls**. (v. 24, 27)

1 Nephi (whole book)

The Know

Nowhere is Nephi’s literary skill more clearly on display than in the expansive chiasmic structure of the entire book of 1 Nephi. John W. Welch has explained that both 1 and 2 Nephi “are independent chiasmic units, centrally focused and symmetrically organized,”¹¹ but 1 Nephi is the more elaborate of the two. In 1 Nephi, “almost every element in the first half of the book” has “a specific counterpart in the second half.”¹² Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions of the tree of life form “the central section of the book,”¹³ with Nephi’s encounter with the Spirit marking the very center.

The Why

The turning point to the story comes as Nephi realizes the need to have the plates for his posterity to keep the commandments (1 Nephi 4:14–15), and this comes at the center of the chiasmic structure. The Lord’s commandments are also a central theme of the entire brass plates narrative, and *command* or *commandments* get repeated 18 times throughout 1 Nephi 3–5.⁸ John W. Welch has also illustrated that this story was actually a carefully written legal argument,⁹ and that chiasmus played an important role in biblical legal texts.¹⁰

The Why

Recognizing the book-length chiasmic patterns in the Book of Mormon helps explain some of the more unusual features of the book’s organization.¹⁴ In the case of 1 and 2 Nephi, it “explains why Nephi divided his writings into two books.”¹⁵ Since Nephi was making a political argument in his small plates record,¹⁶ the placement of his vision at the very center would suggest that “experiencing the same vision as his father Lehi ... [was] the decisive factor which in Nephi’s mind ultimately established him as the successor to his father.”¹⁷

Chiastic Structure of 1 Nephi

- A Lehi **prophesies** warnings of destruction to the Jews and foresees the mercy of God (Chapter 1)
B Lehi's group **departs** from Jerusalem (2:2–15)
C **Nephi establishes himself over his brothers** by obtaining the Plates of Brass (2:16–4:38)
D The sword of **fine steel** (4:9)
E Sariah's **concern** (5:1–9)
F The Plates of **Brass** as a **guide** (5:10–6:6)
G The sons of Lehi get the **daughters of Ishmael** and Ishmael joins the group (7:1–5, 22)
H Nephi **bound with cords** in the wilderness (7:6–21)
I Lehi's vision of the **Tree of Life** (8:1–38)
J Lehi **prophesies about the Old World** and about **the coming of the Lamb** (10:1–22)
K Nephi and the **Spirit of the Lord** (11:1–36)
J Nephi **prophesies about the New World** and **the coming of the Lamb** (12:1–14:30)
I Lehi's vision of the **Tree of Life** interpreted (15:1–36)
G The sons of Lehi marry the **daughters of Ishmael** and Ishmael dies (16:1–8, 34–35)
F The **Brass Ball** as a **guide** (16:9–17, 26–33)
D The bow of **fine steel** (16:18)
C **Nephi establishes himself over his brothers** by building a ship (17:1–18:4) (3:7; cf. 17:3)
H Nephi **bound with cords** on the ship (18:11–16, 20–21)
E Sariah's **afflictions** (18:17–19)
B Lehi's group **arrives** at the Promised Land (18:23–25)
A Nephi **prophesies** concerning the fate of the Jews and concerning the mercy of the Lord unto the afflicted (chapters 19–22)

Alma 36 (see banner image)

The Know

Over the last fifty years, Alma 36 has, by far, been the most celebrated and studied example of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon.¹⁸ Statistically, it's the strongest example of chiasmus in the entire Book of Mormon, having a 99.98% certainty that the chiastic pattern did not occur by chance.¹⁹ The chiastic structure “powerfully communicates Alma's personal experience,” with “the central turning point of his conversion” coming “precisely when he called upon the name Jesus Christ.”²⁰

The Why

Grant Hardy found that “the order and purposeful design of Alma 36 suggests a world in which God . . . is in control.”²¹ As someone who has literally studied hundreds of chiasms in literature spanning across millennia and cultures worldwide, John W. Welch said that Alma 36 “ranks as one of the best uses of chiasmus one can imagine.”²² Its literary power and elegance compelled prominent biblical scholar David Noel Freedman to say, “Mormons are very lucky. Their book is very beautiful.”²³

So there you have it—10 of the most interesting chiasms found in the Book of Mormon. Which was your favorite? While these may not *definitively* be the top 10—there are many more examples of compelling and significant chiastic patterns in the Book of Mormon—they provide a representative sample of Book of Mormon chiasms.

These 10 chiasms illustrate the variety, creativity, beauty, artistry, complexity, and overall significance of the Book of Mormon's use of chiasmus. Indeed, as Freedman described it, the Book of Mormon is a very beautiful book.

Further Reading

Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007).

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).

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; reprint FARMS, 1996).

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Notes

1. “Chiasmus Index: Book of Mormon,” at *Chiasmus Resources*; Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007).
2. John W. Welch, “Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 14, 13, capitalization altered.
3. See Book of Mormon Central, “What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 1,” *KnoWhy* 349 (August 7, 2017); Book of Mormon Central, “What Can We Learn from 10 of the Best Chiasms in the Book of Mormon? Part 2,” *KnoWhy* 352 (August 14, 2017).
4. See Book of Mormon Central, “What Counts as Chiasmus? (1 Nephi 19:7),” *KnoWhy* 337 (July 10, 2017).
5. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, GER: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981; reprint Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999), 199.
6. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 23.
7. See all nine chiasms in Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 5–12. Six of the chiasms in this portion of Nephi’s record are evaluated based on both statistical and subjective criteria in Dennis Newton, “Nephi’s Use of Inverted Parallels,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 79–106. Of the chiasms from 1 Nephi 3–5, only one (1 Nephi 5:1–6) was deemed “not likely” to be intentional (p. 91, fig. 4). In contrast, the intentionality of the chiasmic structure in 1 Nephi 4:5–24 was judged to be “probable.”
8. Joseph Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd edition (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 84–90. On the frequency of command or commandment, see 1 Nephi 3:2, 4, 5, 7 (3x), 15, 16 (2x), 18, 21; 4:1, 11, 15, 17, 20, 34.
9. John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 119–141.
10. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in Biblical Law: An Approach to the Structure of Legal Texts in the Hebrew Bible,” *Jewish Law Association Studies* 4 (1990): 5–22.
11. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” (1981), 199.
12. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” (1981), 199.
13. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” (1981), 199.
14. 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; reprint FARMS, 1996), 49.
15. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” (1981), 199.
16. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Political Testament,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 220–229; Noel B. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 15–37.

17. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," (1981), 199.

18. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36," *FARMS Preliminary Report* (1989); John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 114–131; Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 137–142.

19. Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, "Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?" *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 110, 121–123.

20. Welch, "A Masterpiece," 118.

21. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 140–141.

22. Welch, "A Masterpiece," 131.

23. David Noel Freedman, as quoted in 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), 206.