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Much More than a Reader: The Latest in Chiastic Studies for Interested Scholars and Lay Readers Alike

Author(s): Steven L. Olsen

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**MUCH MORE THAN A READER:
THE LATEST IN CHIASTIC STUDIES
FOR INTERESTED SCHOLARS
AND LAY READERS ALIKE**

Steven L. Olsen

Review of *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, edited by John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: BYU Studies and Book of Mormon Central, 2020). 358 pages. \$24.68, paperback.

Abstract: *This collection of essays represents the latest scholarship on chiasmus. They were selected from papers delivered at an academic conference at Brigham Young University in 2017. Articles reflect both “the state of the art” and the state of the technique in chiasmic studies.*

In the academic world, readers are published collections of articles that represent the breadth, depth, variety, and history of the best scholarship on a given theme. Readers may reflect the current nature of scholarly understanding or indicate a turning point in the intellectual interest in a subject. They often supplement textbooks as principal sources in undergraduate lower or upper division courses.

This new collection of essays edited by Jack Welch and Donald Parry is an academic reader in multiple senses:

1. It introduces students of all ages and experience levels to the latest research in chiasmic studies as manifest in a variety of ancient literary sources, including the Hebrew Bible (six articles), Christian Bible (two articles), Book of Mormon (one article), and Mayan texts (one article). In addition, Professor Welch himself illustrates the comparative value of chiasmus in analyzing several homicide narratives in the Bible and Book of Mormon.

2. It complements and updates the standard and still valuable collection of articles on chiastic studies published four decades earlier, also edited by Professor Welch.¹
3. It offers an operational definition of this ancient literary convention and considers its rhetorical value for writers, redactors, editors, readers, and critics.
4. It includes an extended bibliography of published works on chiasmus.

But this volume is much more than an academic reader. Collectively, these essays are also a statement of respect for Professor Welch, who recently retired as one of the leading international contributors to this scholarly tradition and who introduced chiastic studies to Latter-day Saint scholars a half century ago after he had discovered the traditional Hebrew literary convention used throughout the text of the Book of Mormon.² Scholarly studies of the Book of Mormon have not been the same since. The event that gave rise to this “state of the art” publication was an academic conference at Brigham Young University in August 2017.³ This celebration brought together dozens of scholars and clerics to reflect on this standard but not uncontroversial literary convention of (primarily) the ancient Near East.

Those who are more than a little familiar with this convention recognize chiasmus as a specialized and complex expression of parallelism, an even more ubiquitous literary convention of biblical Hebrew.⁴ As generally understood, chiasms are an inverted parallelism, in which several linguistic elements flow in reverse order around a central axis, e.g., A/B/C/D/E/D'/C'/B'/A'. The center element (in this case, “E”) is not only its structural fulcrum but also its interpretive nexus.

1. John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim, DEU: Gerstenberg, 1981).

2. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 69–84.

3. For full proceedings of the conference, including recordings for selected sessions, see <https://chiasmusresources.org/chiasmus-open-conference-state-art>. The volume being considered in this review is available for free, in PDF format, at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/journal/volume-592-supplement-chiasmus-2020/>.

4. E.g., Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985). The prevalence of parallelism in the Book of Mormon is seen in Donald W. Parry, comp., *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon*, foreword by John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007).

While the standard form of chiasms seems clear and straightforward, their actual appearance in literary texts is anything but. As with most sophisticated literary conventions, chiasms evidence considerable variation as used by skilled authors, editors, and redactors, who are not following linguistic rules as much as making literary sense of crucial contents. The protean nature of chiasms renders their study relevant to a wide variety of rhetorical purposes (interpretation, retention, clarity, and focus, to name a few), a wide range of aesthetic skills (from simple and direct to sophisticated and complex), and all levels of textual inclusion (from individual phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and ideas to entire descriptions, settings, themes, narratives, and compositions). Thus, the search for and analysis of chiasms can be rewarding and insightful but also subject to misuse and abuse.

The scholarship in this volume represents not only the “state of the art” but also the “state of the technique or method.” Eight of the essays focus largely on the artistry and interpretive value of chiasms, while the final three essays examine the technical criteria and methods that define and distinguish them. Technical studies may be necessary to protect against the tendency to be overly skeptical of their existence altogether or naively enthusiastic about their use and purpose.

These essays provide excellent examples of the remarkable hermeneutical and rhetorical insights into ancient texts that can come from chiastic studies as well as the analytical rigor required to gain the resulting insights. I offer a few personal favorites that exemplify both qualities.

John W. Welch (“Narrating Homicides Chiastically,” pp. 151–76) applies chiasmus comparatively to profound the ancient Hebrew law codes regarding homicide as well as several biblical narratives involving murder. This test case is especially salient because of the absolute seriousness of homicide in biblical cultures. This article claims that if the concept of chiasmus can delimit, clarify, and interpret the concept and instances of such a terrible act as murder, then its value as an analytical tool in the Hebrew Bible is unsurpassed. After demonstrating the relevance of this perspective in several biblical cases, Welch takes on one of the most problematic passages in the Book of Mormon — Nephi’s killing of the Jewish leader Laban (1 Nephi 4:4–27). He illustrates how the concept of chiasmus reveals the depth of meaning of this tragic event and the crucial role the event plays in the larger Nephite narrative. At the same time, Welch uses the troubling instance of homicide to illustrate the many sophisticated literary functions that chiasmus can serve in a sacred text.

Here I tentatively offer a suggestion that may add meaning to Welch's study of the death of Laban. The chiasmic structure of the narrative recognizes 1 Nephi 4:14–15 as its axis. The centerpiece of this key narrative in this sacred record is not only a reminder of the necessity to keep God's commandments, as Welch observes. It is also, and perhaps more importantly the rehearsal of God's first recorded words to Nephi, which serve as the foundation of an eternal covenant that defines and guides this "remnant of Israel" for a millennium and becomes the anchor of their core, eternal identity, and the basis of their eventual destruction and promise for an eventual restoration in the end of time (see 1 Nephi 2:20–21). Thus, the death of Laban symbolizes the preservation of God's covenant with this extended family of exiles, whose written legacy will be the means of renewing and fulfilling that covenant of salvation on behalf of all mankind in the last days. Nephi's chiasmic structuring of the death of Laban reinforces this central truth claim of the Book of Mormon.

Noel Reynolds's essay on 2 Nephi ("Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: 2 Nephi as a Case Study," pp. 177–92) provides another remarkable insight into the interpretive value of chiasmus. Based on established academic norms, Reynolds illustrates how the entire book of 2 Nephi is bound, structured, and focused for interpretive purposes. In an article-length study, he is able to propose his grand thesis only by a chiasmic structuring of dominant themes of Nephi's second book. Recognizing the subjective quality of using ideas or themes to illustrate the presence of chiasms, Reynolds illustrates that the axis of the book-length chiasm (2 Nephi 11:2–8, which bears witness of Jesus Christ) can be framed as a layered series of more specific chiasms, using every word of the English translation of the text. This elegant, detailed, and comprehensive analysis not only silences the skeptics but also encourages an advocate – maybe even Reynolds himself – to illustrate the extent to which the entire book of 2 Nephi can be understood word-for-word as a complex series of multi-layered chiasms. Doing so would indeed be a *coup* for chiasmic studies!

Douglas Buckwalter ("Jesus and the Roman Centurion (Matthew 8:5–13): A Window to Chiasmus and Apostolic Pedagogy," pp. 193–206) illustrates how chiasmus, as one literary convention, combines with other literary conventions, most notably repetition and contrasting parallelism, to reveal an intricate structuring of Matthew 8:1–11:1. Facing the same dilemma of restricted space as Reynolds, Buckwalter details specific insights to be gained by focusing in detail on one of the

several miracles included in this extended passage: the healing of the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13). Buckwalter demonstrates that skilled authors craft their texts using a wide array of literary conventions, not just chiasms. He illustrates that the point of a textual analysis is to better understand the text as an integrated whole rather than simply to identify its constituent parts. Serious readers can only hope that chiasmic studies can progressively embrace a fuller inventory of diverse literary conventions to reveal the complex, sophisticated, and layered meanings embedded in sacred texts, including the Book of Mormon.

Finally, Gabriella Gelardini (“From ‘Linguistic Turn’ and Hebrews Scholarship to *Anadiplosis Iterata*: The Enigma of a Structure,” pp. 231–56) places chiasmic studies generally and her analysis of the book of Hebrews specifically into a long theological and philosophical tradition. She does so not simply for the sake of academic elegance but also to provide a theoretical frame for her study. I appreciate her attention to a theoretical perspective because all too often students of a particular subject or issue like chiasmus can become so focused that they forget that their studies are part of a larger intellectual and cultural endeavor. Such an insular approach risks the danger of assuming a privileged and self-evident “truth” to one’s chosen subject. Professor Gelardini demonstrates not only the inherent limits of such a position but also the analytical benefits of a more inclusive theoretical perspective.

I strongly recommend this book to every reader with a modicum of interest in literary studies, cultural studies, religious studies, Near East studies, and Latter-day Saint studies. Undoubtedly, you will recognize other essays in the collection as your favorites. Like these scholars, I salute Professor Welch for his persistence in advancing chiasmic studies generally and bringing an awareness of chiasmus into the mainstream of Latter-day Saint scholarship. With these scholars, I wish him well in whatever endeavor ignites his intellectual passion in the next phase of his life.

Steven L. Olsen received AM and PhD degrees in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1978 and 1985, respectively. For the past three decades he has filled various professional and administrative positions with the Church History Department in Salt Lake City, including Senior Curator and Managing Director. Major projects completed under his leadership include the major exhibits: *A Covenant Restored: Historical Foundations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* and

Presidents of the Church at the Church History Museum; the historic site restorations, Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith Farm and Sacred Grove and Book of Mormon Historic Publication Site (western New York), Historic Kirtland and John and Else Johnson Home (northeast Ohio), Cove Fort and Brigham Young Winter Home (Utah); and the Church History Library in Salt Lake City.