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RETHINKING ALMA 36

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Abstract: *While Alma 36 has long been one of the most admired examples of classical Hebrew chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, critiques in the last two decades have questioned whether, in fact, it really meets the requirements of classical biblical chiasms. The principle objections have pointed to the large sections of the chapter that are not easily included in the chiasm as outlined by John W. Welch and other proponents. Until now, this debate has not taken note of dramatic new developments in the analysis of Hebrew rhetoric over the last fifty years. The following essay turns to the discoveries made in this new approach to Hebrew rhetoric and shows that when the new “levels analysis” is incorporated into a study of Alma 36, the entire text does have a role to play in the extended chiastic structure of the chapter.*

[Editor’s Note: An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the 2019 Sperry Symposium and was included in that shortened form in the symposium volume. See *Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, edited by Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith, Religious Studies Center, 2019, 451–72. This complete and updated version is herein published by *Interpreter* with permission of the RSC.]

In 1967, John W. Welch was serving as a missionary in Germany and noticed a scholar’s explanation of chiasmus as a rhetorical structure that recurs in various parts of the Bible. While the penchant for parallelism that characterized Old Testament writers was widely recognized by that time, the discovery that reverse parallelism was also commonly used by Old and New Testament writers was relatively recent and not yet widely accepted. Welch was no ordinary missionary in terms of his scholarly and scriptural preparation, and he immediately saw the possibility that Nephi and his successors may have been familiar with that rhetorical pattern and may have used it in the writings we now know as the Book of Mormon. He went

to work immediately and found numerous examples of chiastic structures in the Book of Mormon text, prominent among which was Alma chapter 36. These discoveries fueled Welch's 1970 master's thesis and a long list of subsequent publications that presented additional discoveries and further refinements in his understanding of the phenomenon, addressed both to Book of Mormon readers and to biblical scholars generally.

In his 1991 abbreviated summary of his earlier writings on chiasmus, Welch reports that "Alma 36 was one of the first chiasms I discovered within the Book of Mormon" and that it continues to be one of his favorites. "It is a masterpiece of composition, as good as any other use of chiasmus in world literature, and it deserves wide recognition and appreciation."¹ By that time, Alma 36 had also become a favorite of informed readers of the Book of Mormon and had even been included in non-Latter-day Saint publications on biblical chiasmus.² Welch himself had become well known and much appreciated by Bible scholars for his insightful compilations and his comprehensive bibliography of chiasmus studies across all relevant disciplines.³

But approval has not been universal. Using criteria for evaluating chiasticity in texts developed by Welch and other experts,⁴ a serious, though small, chorus of doubters emerged. One early criticism that continues to surface is the recognition that in spite of the large number of parallel terms that can be identified in Alma 36, there are still many sentences and even paragraphs that do not seem to have a place within

1. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 116.

2. In his comprehensive reader's guide for the text of the Book of Mormon, Grant Hardy notes that Alma 36 reflects "a careful, deliberate arrangement of Alma's conversion story: "The reversing, balanced halves indicate that Alma had spent some time and effort organizing his memories of an event twenty years earlier into a rhetorically compelling, aesthetically pleasing form." Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141.

3. John W. Welch (editor), *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim, DEU: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), includes five articles written by Welch and six by other scholars, including several written for this volume by some of the best-known scholars in the field of Old Testament studies. Welch's analysis and commentary on Alma 36 can be found on pp. 206–207.

4. Six of these are compared in an online chart provided by Welch's Chiasmus Resources web site: <http://chiasmusresources.johnnwelchresources.com/criteria-chart> accessed January 22, 2016. Prominent among these criteria is the shared view that a good chiasm will not contain much material that does not fit into the chiastic structure.

the proposed chiasmic structure.⁵ Unfortunately, there has been some confusion about Welch's latest writings that has to be addressed. Welch's final in-depth treatment of Alma 36 was never published in a journal or a volume but was simply made available in a 1989 "FARMS Preliminary Report."⁶ The 1991 essay that is better known as a chapter in the popular *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* was in fact much abbreviated, unnecessarily inviting criticisms that might not have emerged had the 1989 version been more widely consulted. In what follows, I will defend Welch's assessment of Alma 36 by offering extensions and modifications of his 1989 analysis that are inspired by important developments in the study of Hebrew rhetoric in recent decades. As far as I can tell, these insights of biblical scholars have not previously been introduced into Latter-day Saint discussion of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon.

Because contemporary scholarly work on the Bible has demonstrated important advances for our understanding of these ancient texts through this kind of intensive analysis, students who appreciate the close relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon will recognize the importance of bringing a similar approach to their study of the Book of Mormon. In what follows, I will explain some of the most recent developments of this kind in biblical studies and apply them to Alma 36 as a demonstration of their potential for enriching our interpretations of the Book of Mormon.

New Understandings of Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric

Beginning about three centuries ago, a few European scholars — sometimes without any awareness of the parallel efforts of others — noticed rhetorical structures featuring repetition and parallelism in the books of the Hebrew Bible. By the 19th century, a few noted reverse parallelisms (chiasms) as well. Initially, it was short chiasms where the key terms were close together, as in poetry. But gradually chiasmus, like parallelism generally, was recognized as an organizational principle that

5. I will not document here the long history of critiques and defenses that have been raised. A helpful review and documentation of this debate by Boyd F. Edwards and W. F. Edwards can be found online at "Response to Earl Wunderli's Critique of Alma 36 as an Extended Chiasm." See http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1572&context=physics_facpub, accessed October 28, 2019. The defense is more completely documented online at <http://www.jefflindsay.com/chiasmus.shtml>, accessed October 28, 2019.

6. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36," FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/chiasmus-alma-36-1>.

could be used for larger texts — and even for entire books of prose. As a result of this growing body of rhetorical studies and reinterpretations of the books of the Old Testament, it is now widely recognized by biblical scholars that in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, Hebrew writers shared a highly developed set of rhetorical principles and techniques which distinguish their work dramatically from the ancient rhetorical traditions of Greece and Rome. These developments offer a powerful step forward in our understanding of their writing strategies and of the meanings their works promote.

My review of two recent books in this field presents a more comprehensive report on these developments.⁷ In this paper, I will rely principally on the discovery that when longer texts are organized chiasmically, the ordered elements of that chiasm will consist of subordinate units of text that will themselves be delimited and organized according to some rhetorical principle — and will not necessarily be best understood through a listing of all the repeated words, phrases, or topics that may occur in a chiasmic order. In fact, these subordinate units may contain their own subordinate units, thus illustrating the principle of subordinating levels of rhetorical structure in Hebrew writing that some analysts have found extending to as many as eight levels when they include grammatical and philological parallels.⁸ Because we do not have the original language version of Alma 36, we cannot go that deeply in our analysis. But I will propose going all the way to a seventh subordinate level at one point in my analysis of Alma 36.

Some of the criticisms directed at Welch's analysis of Alma 36 may have assumed the principles of Hebrew rhetoric mentioned above are rules that provide templates into which a writer was expected to force his text. That would be a serious misunderstanding. Rather, the leading studies of Hebrew rhetoric have identified patterns or rhetorical principles they have found in use in a wide variety of adaptations by different authors. But these

7. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 91–98, for a brief introduction to the current state of understanding as represented in Hebrew rhetorical studies. The two works selected for this review were Jack R. Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), and Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

8. For the most detailed explanation of rhetorical levels, see Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis*, 199–308. Further commentary, historical background, and explanation can be found in his most recent volume on this general topic: Roland Meynet, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, trans. by Leo Arnold (Boston: Brill, 2012), 51 ff.

authors obviously felt free to use those principles or patterns creatively to help them express the content of their writings. As I have compared the biblical examples identified by these scholars with the examples we find in the Nephite writings, I am repeatedly impressed that the latter are often more artistic and innovative in their applications of the principles of Hebrew rhetoric in their compositions than anything we have in the biblical writings. That would definitely be true of Alma 36.

What soon becomes evident as we attempt to analyze the structures of these kinds of texts is that any particular word, phrase, or sentence may be drawing simultaneously on others to provide its full meaning — some of which may be close by and others which may be placed at some considerable distance in the text. Commentators have noted that the rhetoric we have learned in the Western tradition is *hypotactic* in that it is direct, open, linear, and logical. Hebrew rhetoric, in contrast, is *paratactic* in that it tends to be indirect, making important points both through its structure and through words that may have their full meaning developed and adjusted gradually throughout the text.⁹ As Alma demonstrates in chapter 38, he is capable of both forms of narration when he retells the same conversion story and principles to his son Shiblon quite directly with much of the same phrasing, but without the carefully developed rhetorical structures of chapter 36. It is tempting to speculate that a writer like Alma might have made this special effort with a text that he intended to be used widely in pedagogical situations in the powerful and memorable form that he has given to it.

Both Welch, in his analysis of Alma 36, and his critics and defenders tended to rely principally on the earlier practice of analyzing longer texts by focusing on the sequence of repeated terms they contain. Using that approach, it is understandable that critics could find the extensive pieces of the text that do not fit readily into Welch's chiasm to be problematic. However, by 1989, Welch and a few others were beginning to recognize the potential importance of subordinate textual units, even without guidance from Hebrew rhetorical analysts. It should be noted, however, that while Welch's 1991 refinement of his analysis of Alma 36 retains the 34-element analysis of repeated terms, it then drops back to his 1989 division of the text into 22 units (11 sets of parallels) for his extended interpretation. In retrospect, this move constitutes a prescient step in the direction of the emerging scholarly consensus about Hebrew rhetoric.¹⁰

9. See the discussion in Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric*, 73–34.

10. Donald Parry makes some similar moves as he notices and accommodates other parallel elements that are not reflected in the larger chiasm of the chapter. See

The analysis of Alma 36 I will now present extends that move and demonstrates that when 17 sub-units of the text (eight sets of parallel text units plus one central unit) are analyzed separately, subordinate rhetorical levels emerge. This shows that all the “extra text” that has bothered critics is in fact built into the complex chiasmic structure of Alma 36 in ways that support and enrich that larger rhetorical unit and that conform to 7th-century Hebrew rhetoric as currently understood.

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. Careful readers will want to return to this list after reading the analysis to see if they agree these conclusions are fully supported by the analysis.

As will be seen, 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, the two must be interpreted simultaneously. One of the great virtues of Hebrew rhetoric is that it facilitates a marriage of structure and message in a powerful way that engages the reader’s intellect on multiple levels. Like earlier biblical writers, Alma is using both words and rhetorical structures to convey meaning. I find that in this chapter the two cannot be productively separated. The real test of the rhetorical analysis is its success in portraying and supporting the doctrinal teaching. For that reason, I have taken the unusual step of listing nine conclusions about both form and content at the beginning.

1. Using the categories and terminology proposed by Meynet in his most recent handbook of Hebrew rhetoric, Alma 36 would be seen as a “concentric composition” because it has an odd number of text units with the center unit providing a turning point for the larger chiasm with its sixteen parallel units.¹¹
2. The most striking feature of the chiasm that organizes the text of Alma 36 is that the middle half of the chiasm employs

Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2007), 318–21.

11. Meynet, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, 163 ff. Meynet allowed himself one neologism in his treatise on Hebrew rhetoric and labels this kind of chiasm a *concentrism* and notes that “concentrism is found on all levels of text organization.”

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 first half of the chiasm. This structural reversal strongly suggests that the first and second halves of the chiasm will have additional messages of their own.

3. 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 construction of an entire half of a large, chiastically 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 to Lehi's branch — understood as prospering and protecting faithful Israel in this world's affairs. 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.
4. 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 "whomsoever" 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 view that the full and true meaning of the Abrahamic covenant given to Israel is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the invitations and promises it offers to all men and women as individuals.¹²

12. For a comprehensive analysis of these two covenants as understood by the Nephite prophets, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018), 39–74.

5. Alma uses the rhetorical structure itself as a powerful demonstration of the gospel principles he is teaching. The Hebrew word for repentance means to turn back — meaning, to turn away from our own self-chosen paths back to the path the Lord has prepared for us. Both the chiasmic structure of the text and the personal history it recounts focus dramatically on Alma’s turning back and its dramatic consequences for himself and for others.
6. 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 and women 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 in an infinitive phrase, signals that it is this atonement of Christ that can replace the negatives of human life with eternal positives.
7. 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 turning to Christ personally, trusting in him and the effectiveness of his atonement.
8. The covenant that we make at the time we repent — 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.¹³
9. Alma opens and closes his long chiasm 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. The teachings of the central portions of the text will inform expanded meanings of the briefer introductory and concluding statements.

13. As Alma explains in his non-chiasmic rehearsal of the same story and principles to his second son Shiblon, “blessed is he that endureth to the end” (Alma 38:2).

Level 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 with their own internal rhetorical structures 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 the sections that follow I will identify the rhetorical levels I find in Alma 36. This will provide necessary background for the subsequent discussion of the individual text units organized by a variety of rhetorical structures at each level.

Level 1

The Book of Alma is a major text unit designated by Mormon as compiler. We should assume he had a plan and reasons for including several different sections in the one book. The heading Mormon provides at the beginning and the final verses at the end explicitly define the book's boundaries by the transition from the reigns of the kings to the reign of judges at the beginning, and specifically of Alma the Younger as the first chief judge to the transmission of the records to Alma's grandson Helaman at the end. By starting at the level of the book, I am respecting the paradigm for rhetorical levels laid out particularly by Meynet. But it remains to be determined whether Mormon followed these same rhetorical principles in compiling the Book of Alma (as Alma evidently did in his composition of the piece we know as Alma 36) which he appears to have excerpted from a much larger record four centuries later.

Level 2

I am not prepared at this point to propose a division of the major textual units of the Book of Alma into sections from Mormon's point of view.¹⁴ Quite obviously, we have a wide range of separate stories and events included in the one book, which are in turn drawn from the records of two different prophets, Alma and his son Helaman. A grouping of three

14. Grant Hardy proposed a promising structural analysis for Alma 1–44 as one rhetorical unit divided into six smaller units that together form a chiasmic structure. See Grant Hardy, "Nurturing Faith: Literary Patterning in the Book of Mormon," in *Give Ear To My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, edited by Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2019), 369–88.

chapters (XVII–XIX) in the 1830 edition is devoted to commandments given by Alma to his three sons, all of which is presented in first-person voice, suggesting that Mormon had excerpted this text directly from Alma’s record. The three-way division of this section of the Book of Alma is reinforced both by the text itself and by text marking preserved in the translation process. Orson Pratt’s 1879 re-division of the text into smaller chapters and verses¹⁵ recognized the rhetorical shift in the Helaman chapter by dividing it into two precisely at the end of the opening *inclusio*.¹⁶ The much shorter Shiblon chapter was preserved as one, and the long Corianton chapter was divided four ways, giving us a total of seven chapters, chapters 36–42 in the modern version.

Level 3

Chapter 36 is set off from the rest of this section of the book as an *inclusio*. The first sentence ends with the phrase “my words,” and the final sentence ends with “his word.” *Inclusio* may be the most common technique for setting boundaries between larger sections of text in the Hebrew Bible. It works nicely for chiasmic texts as well because it repeats at the end of the text unit the same word or phrase that is used at the beginning. Note that the repeated words do not necessarily signal the principal theme of the text unit they set off. The identification of particular words as markers of an *inclusio* is vindicated when the internal rhetorical structures of the proposed *inclusio* conform to that division in convincing ways.

Level 4

When the text in this level-3 *inclusio* is analyzed into level-4 sub-units, a rhetorical structure of 17 elements emerges — 16 of which constitute the eight parallel pairs of the chapter-length chiasm. The 17th unit at the center is itself a single chiasm, imitating at the center the essential structure of the larger whole. The 17 sub-units are distinguished from one another by their internal rhetorical structures, which vary according to

15. The text quoted throughout this paper is taken from the critical edition of the Book of Mormon: Royal Skousen (ed.), *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). See page *xl* of the “Editor’s Preface” for an explanation of chapter breaks and versification.

16. An *inclusio* is a rhetorical device widely used in the Bible and other ancient literatures to mark where a special unit of text begins and ends. This demarcation can be accomplished by repeating at the end of the passage a word, phrase, or even a sentence from the beginning of the passage, thus providing it with obviously intended bookends. For a helpful explanation of *inclusio*, the history of this usage in studies of biblical rhetoric, and biblical examples of its use, see Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric*, 325–27.

the contents of each, and not according to some larger pattern. But once these sub-units are so distinguished, the larger chiasmic organization of the chapter can be seen.¹⁷ The following list identifies the key parallel semantic elements in the textual level-4 sub-units that are paired chiasmatically (A with A*, B with B*, and so on through text units H/H*).

Level 4 Analysis: The Concentric Organization of Alma 36

Parallel by Repetition

A/A*	“my word” = “his word”
B/B*	“that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land”
C/C*	remember “the captivity” of our fathers
D/D*	“trust in God” and be “supported in trials, troubles,” and afflictions (faith in Jesus Christ and enduring to the end).
E/E*	knowledge “of God” = “born of God”

Parallel by Negation

F/F*	“destroy the church of God” = “bring souls unto repentance”
G/G*	“fell to the earth” = “stood upon my feet”
H/H*	“that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God” = “my soul did long to be there”

Turning Point

I	Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the world.
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I have included the inclusio boundary markers of Alma 36 in the chiasmic analysis as A and A* because taken together, they articulate a minor theme of the larger unit by explaining how Alma’s word can become the Lord’s word. From that simple beginning, there is a gradual

17. In Lundbom, *Biblical Rhetoric*, 25–36, the author provides general principles and common patterns by which texts can be delimited into sub-units. He provides an instructive example when he goes on in chapter 4 to apply these to his analysis of Jeremiah (pages 37–59).

progression of rhetorical complexity in the eight pairs of text units. Parallels B, C, and D are matched by the simple repetition of their central concept with approximately the same vocabulary in sub-units B*, C* and D*. The parallel between E and E* teaches how the “knowledge of God” comes from being “born of God.” Text units F, G, and H tell Alma’s story as an enemy of God and his church, while the reverse polarity of their parallel units in F*, G*, and H* shows how the blessings of the atonement in the lives of those who repent reverse all the negatives in Alma’s sinful life. The central chiasm in unit I portrays the transformation of the anguishing sinner who can call upon Christ into a saint who is “born of God,” through the power of the atonement, a transformation that is elaborated throughout the rest of the chapter.

I am proposing this 17-unit analysis as a modification of the 22-unit discussion that Welch offers in his 1989 and 1991 updates. Each of these 17 units will be analyzed rhetorically later in this paper.

Levels 5/6/7

Each of the 17 textual sub-units of the larger chiasm has a developed substructure of typical Hebrew rhetorical character. Note that in the following analyses, level-4 units are marked by capital letters, level-5 by small letters, level-6 expansions by small roman numerals, and, in one case, Arabic numbers for level-7 expansions on level-6 material. As will be shown below, this division of text units into a descending series of subordinate units allows the rhetorical analysis to include every word of the larger text without rearrangement.

Review of Welch 1989 and 1991

As described above, Welch’s analysis proposes 17 words or phrases repeated in reverse order providing the “main girders” of the structure of the chiasm. He then assigns these 34 parallel terms to 22 natural sections in the text of Alma 36. In the analysis that follows, I re-analyze the division into textual sub-units and reduce the total number to 17. I believe that Hebrew rhetoric as now understood would favor seeing the 17 units of text as the structure of the chiasm, even though there really are 34 terms that can be paired in a chiastic ordering.

Welch based his commentary in both the 1989 and the 1991 articles on the 22 text sections. He also identified some substructures in these sections, including one chiasm and three double triplets with parallel content for each pair. This was clearly an imaginative and prescient step in the direction of the emerging discovery of Hebrew rhetoricians that

these kinds of texts often turn out to be organized at several levels, using similar forms of repetition and parallelism at each level. Welch's 1989 paper reports some early steps in this direction in previous contributions from other writers as well.¹⁸

Full Text Analysis of Levels 4, 5, 6, and 7

What follows is a rewriting of the text following a long-established technique of using vertical alignments to indicate both shifts in text level and subordinate elements within text units. No perfect system has been developed for rewriting these complex texts. Different scholars have used different systems according to personal preference and system effectiveness for specific texts. The goal is always, as in the present case, to make the textual structure as intelligible as possible with the imposed vertical layout.¹⁹

Structure A/A*

1²⁰ A My son, give ear to *my words*,

30 A* Now this is according to *his word*.

The opening and closing lines employ a simple inclusio to mark this chapter off as a separate unit of text within a larger section of the Book of Alma. 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.²¹ The last line of Alma 36 (A*) seems to perform that function.

18. See, for example, the analysis reported in Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36," 7–10.

19. See Meynet's explanation of "rewriting" in Meynet, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, 188.

20. The verse numbers of the 1981 Latter-day Saint edition are provided in the left margin for the reader's convenience.

21. Lundbom borrows the concept of ballast lines from Muilenburg and George Adam Smith and illustrates the form these took in Isaiah in Lundbom, *Biblical*

- 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.*

B* uses the same triplet structure modeled in 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 expand or intensify the meaning of the first statement.²³

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 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 and/or the Mosaic covenant as these have come down to the Nephites.

The traditional biblical interpretation of these covenants tends to measure “prospering” in terms of territorial independence, multiplication 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.

23. Robert Alter used Psalm 13 to illustrate this typical pattern in Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 62–64.

Structure C/C*

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*

- 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,*
- ii* and he hath also *by his everlasting power* delivered them
- i* *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;*
- BL yea, and *ye also had ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity.*
(ballast line)

While these level-4 units are clearly presented as parallels, the abundance of parallel and repeated elements they contain offer multiple options for outlining their internal rhetorical structures. I propose above what seems to me the simplest analysis, and the one that recognizes the most repetitions. Unit C begins, and C* ends, with the same direct appeal to Helaman — that he remember the captivity of their fathers as his father, Alma, has done. These sentences appear simultaneously as two of the scattered forms of address to Helaman in Alma 36 and provide an *inclusio* that binds the two units together as one literary unit when C and C* are read together. The complex sentence that begins verse 2 is broken apart into two sentences when repeated at the end of C*, while preserving exactly the same content.

The four clauses that are spliced together in the remainder of verse 2 can be set out at level 5 as a five-part chiasm that identifies their *bondage* with their *afflictions* and asserts at its center the unique power of Israel's god. C* picks up immediately after the general claims made in C to provide in a level-5 structure specific instances of God's deliverance of his people. First, the classic example of ancient Israel's delivery from Egypt is presented appropriately as a triplet that specifies the three key elements of that formative deliverance: (1) he "brought our fathers out of Egypt," (2) he "swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea," and (3) he led [our fathers] "by his power into the promised land."

Still at level 5, the three remaining clauses are then stretched into a four-element chiasm that expands Israel's history of deliverance to include in principle the many divine interventions witnessed "from time to time" by the Nephites, "even down to the present day." For just as God "brought our fathers out of Egypt," so he has "also brought our [Nephite] fathers out of the land of Jerusalem."

Examples of additional exodus accounts would obviously include Nephi's flight from the land of their first inheritance and the first Mosiah's flight from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla. Counting Lehi's flight from Jerusalem, the Nephites and Mulekites now combined are heirs to at least four exodus experiences since the classic deliverance from Egypt. Specifically mentioned by the angel in Alma's earlier account of this experience, were (1) the escape of his own father with his converts from the city of Nephi, first to the valley of Helam, and then on to Zarahemla, and (2) the subsequent escape of the remaining Nephites from the city of Nephi back to Zarahemla (Helaman 27:16).

Together, the level-5 triplet and chiasm of C* witness and emphasize the unique power of Israel's god as acclaimed by the chiasm in C and echoed

explicitly in both rhetorical structures in C*. He “led [ancient Israel] *by his power* into the promised land, and the Nephites have seen how “*by his everlasting power* [he] delivered them out of bondage and captivity.”

C* concludes by separating the two statements merged in the complex opening sentence of C into two sentences, which together bring the constructive inclusio of the combined C and C* to a conclusion. By separating them, the last sentence can be used as a ballast line to provide a final and rhetorically independent emphasis on Alma’s primary purpose in these passages — urging Helaman to follow his fatherly example in remembering the captivity of their fathers.

Implicitly, this message of deliverance is meant to evoke Alma’s summary of the many instances in which God delivered him (Helaman’s own father) from the trials, troubles, and afflictions of life; from the dangers of bonds, prisons, and death with which he was threatened in his service to God; and his knowledge that God will lift Alma “up at the last day to dwell with him in glory” (the final words of D* that preceded C*). And once again, Alma identifies the promises of the Abrahamic/Lehite covenant with those of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This focus on the promises of the covenant of Abraham now turns out to serve as a frame for the even greater promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ in D and D*, where we learn that those who trust in God will be lifted up “at the last day to dwell with him in glory.” So, the covenant of Abraham turns out to be a surrogate for the gospel of Christ — so formulated that it can be understood by Israel and all the world. And the power of Israel’s god to bless and punish can be measured by the experience of the Israelites and the Nephites through cycles of obedience and rebellion.

This interpretation is reinforced by the explicit mention of “the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” at the beginning of the chapter, in the center of the chiasm in verse 2, and the repeated reference to “Jesus, the Son of God” at the center of the central chiasm of the chapter in verses 17–18. As Welch noted in 1989, Nils Lund had reported the tendency of the Psalms to mention the divine names at the center of chiasms.²⁴ These mirroring statements at the beginning and the center of this text alert us to Alma’s recognition that Jesus is the God of Abraham, and that we should not be surprised to learn that the covenant given to Abraham will turn out to be the same offered in His gospel. In the next chapter, Alma will complete his teachings and commandments

24. Welch, “Chiasmus in Alma 36,” 27, referring to Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 41.

to his son Helaman and will emphasize the guidance of God — provided through the director as it led Lehi to the promised land — as an analogy to the gospel, which can guide all men and women to eternal life. This linkage is explicit in both the language and the chiasmic structure of Alma 37:44–46:

- A For behold, it is as easy to give heed to *the word of Christ*, which will point to you a straight course to *eternal bliss*,
- B as it was for our fathers to give heed to *this compass*, which would point unto them a straight course to the *promised land*.
- C And now I say, is there not a type in this thing?
- B* For just as assuredly as *this director* did bring our fathers, by following its course, to *the promised land*,
- A* shall *the word of Christ*, if we follow its course, carry us *beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise*.

Structure D/D*

- D
- 3 And now, O my son Helaman, behold, thou art in thy youth,
 - a and therefore, I beseech of thee
 - b that thou wilt hear my words
 - c 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.
- BL Yea, and I will praise him forever

D begins with an appeal to Helaman (“I beseech thee) to “hear my words and learn of me,” and is the most prominent of the scattered salutations or invitations to listen or hear as discussed above under A. This line does not readily fit into the rhetorical form of the passage, except possibly, as an aside to Alma’s readers, begging them to listen to and learn this central message. For we have here another structure, much like the combination of C and C*, where the two parallel sections feature the same message and repeat the same terminology. As C and C* were combined into one inclusio, when read together, so D and D* form a chiasm when viewed together. Each of these is presented as Alma’s testimony that (1) “whomsoever shall put their trust in God,” (2) “shall be supported in their trials and their troubles and their afflictions,” and (3) “shall be lifted up at the last day.” In D, this message is presented as universal, for all people “whomsoever,” in a straightforward quatrain, without commentary. And, unlike the Abrahamic covenant, it is offered to all people as individuals. But in D*, Alma makes it his personal testimony — slipping three times to level-6 commentary to provide personal facts that support his general claims. He personally has been supported in his trials, troubles, and afflictions — “from prisons and from bonds and from death.” He puts his trust in God and knows “that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory.”

Verse 3 begins with a repetition and expansion of the same appeal to Alma’s son Helaman made in verse 1. These statements addressing his son

as the audience provide the second of six such forms of address that are largely independent from the rest of the presentation's structure, though they are rather evenly distributed — three in each half of the chiasm. This second appeal, however, is unique in that it points to Helaman's youth as Alma's reason for sharing these words and for encouraging him to learn from his father. Presumably, this appeal, like the teaching that follows, is intended to have universal application to all who may benefit from Alma's teaching, and especially to the youth.

What follows will be what Alma would teach Helaman (and others in their youth). The message of D is focused: Those who trust in God (faith in Christ), will be supported in trials and lifted up at the last day. The emphasis seems to be on the difficulties of this life, identified and specified as "their trials, and their troubles and their afflictions." The first three of the four principal elements are framed as the promise of the Abrahamic covenant, but now extended conditionally to all men, universal in its scope: "whomsoever shall put their trust in God." The universality of the promise foreshadows the introduction of the gospel version of the promise in Alma's fourth element — the promise of being "lifted up at the last day." This addition transforms this universalized version of the covenant of Abraham into a straightforward gospel merism articulating the first and last elements of the six-element gospel formula — those who exercise faith in Christ will be saved. The gospel requirement of enduring to the end is also invoked implicitly by the references to trials, troubles, and afflictions.²⁵

D* picks up with a repetition of the same three elements of the Abrahamic covenant, but in reversed order, forming a chiasm when read with those lines from D, but then also repeating the gospel promise of being lifted up in a fourth line.

- a I do know...
- b ...put their trust in God...
- c supported in trials, troubles and afflictions
- d lifted up at the last day
- c* supported in trials, troubles and afflictions

25. For an explanation of how Book of Mormon writers used abbreviated lists (merisms) of the six basic gospel principles to evoke the reader's knowledge of the full list hundreds of times, see Noel B. Reynolds, "Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017), 106–34.

- b* ...put my trust in him...
- a* And I know...
- d* raise me up at the last day

D* begins with a repetition of the same Abrahamic promises, but now as reports of Alma's own experience with God wherein he has been "delivered" from great difficulties, a specific threesome to match the specifications of the promise: "from prisons and from bonds and from death." He doubly emphasizes the unconstrained range of the promise to be supported under trials and troubles of every kind and in all manner of afflictions. This embedded doubled emphasis is echoed in the next sentence, which affirms that God "will still *deliver* me," repeating the synonym for *being supported* that Alma has introduced in the personal reference to prisons, bonds, and death in the preceding sentence. These two doublings, which are not part of the chiasmic structure given to the articulation of the Abrahamic promises, prepare us for the finale, which emphasizes and expands the same gospel promise added at the end of D as an ending for D*.

This presents us with a powerful, and possibly unprecedented, variation on standard chiasmic form and also clearly signals the parallelism of segments D and D*. Both begin with the same three elements in a shared structure and end with the same addition that transforms blessings in this world promised through the covenant of Abraham into blessings in eternity promised to those who keep the new covenant of Christ. While the first reference to being lifted at Dd provides a focal point for the resulting chiasm, the repetition at D*d* can serve as a ballast line by being held to the end. This creative arrangement also allows Alma to apply his affirmation of personal testimony ("and I know...") at the end of the constructed chiasm to the repeated and expanded gospel promise of being raised up at the last day—forging a formal link between the chiasm articulating the covenant of Abraham and the repeated conclusion articulating the gospel promise.

It should also be noted that this constructive chiasm in D/D* marks the conclusion of the first half of the grand chiasm of Alma 36. If the rest of the text were removed, it would provide a central chiasm in the same way verses 17–18 do for the whole chapter, and it could be read without the illumination of the gospel message that will be witnessed in the central section of the chapter. Placed at this key transition between Alma's endorsement of the covenant of Abraham and the personal account of his own conversion and acceptance of the covenant of the gospel of Jesus

Christ, it foreshadows the chiasm outlined in I and dramatizes Alma's teaching that brings the two covenants together in one.

Structure E/E*

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*.

26 E*

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 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, E introduces the language of negative alternatives that will provide the dynamic for the next three pairings, using “not” six times. 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. 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 read smoothly and seamlessly and not bounce from one text unit to the next in a noticeable way.²⁶ E begins and ends with Alma's insistence that this special knowledge 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 6 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, being also *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*. We know from v. 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 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.²⁷

26. Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36," 24–25.

27. For a superb analysis of the Book of Mormon terminology *born of God*, *cut off from his presence*, and other related phrases, see Jennifer C. Lane, "Born of God—Partaking of the Fruit," in *Give Ear To My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, edited by Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2019), 109–27.

Structure F/F*

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.

24 F*

- 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 chiasmic organization of Alma 36 where the principal parallels will be negative. Their efforts to destroy the church, described in F, will be transformed as they “labored without ceasing” to bring others to repentance and to taste the joy they have tasted — to be born of God and filled with the Holy Ghost. 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. 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.” 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 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, and they in turn convey the same testimony to others.

Structure G/G*

G

- 8 a But behold, *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.*

23 G*

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 level-4 chiasm of Alma 36. Three of the five sets of parallel lines in G are parallel by negation. In G/a Alma hears a voice, and in G/a* he “did hear no more.” In G/b he stands up, and in G/b* he falls “to the earth.” In G/c the angel threatens Alma with personal destruction, and in G/c* he expresses his fear of being destroyed. In G/d he describes being paralyzed for three days, and in G/d* he explains the paralysis, saying that he “was struck with such great fear and amazement.” In G/e Alma reports that his brethren heard other things the angel said, but in G/e*, 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 parallel units of a chiasm do not need to display the same rhetorical structures in their sub-units.

Structure H/H*

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*,
- i 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. (Cf. 1 Nephi 1:8)

BL Yea, and my soul did long to be there.

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-5 elements are themselves units that have their own internal rhetorical structures at level 6. 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 6-element chiasm as it dips four times into the sixth 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-5 chiastic structure. In a/a*, Alma reports how he was “racked” with “eternal torment” or “the pains of a damned soul.” In b/b*, he reports how the memory of his “sins and iniquities” tormented him—how he feared to be judged “of [his] deeds.” In c/c*, he confesses that “he had rebelled against” his God, “so great had been [his] iniquities.” In the level-6 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 thought of coming into the presence of [his] God” at the judgment did rack his soul “with inexpressible horror.” These are phrases and concepts introduced at the sixth level that Alma can now employ in further level-5 parallels.

The 5-element chiasm of H* features the reversal of the pains and guilt that are so forcibly expressed in H. The “marvelous light” Alma reports in H*a corresponds to his vision in H*a* of “God sitting upon his throne.” In H*b, the pains are gone and his “soul was filled with joy.” H*b* intensifies that description saying “there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy.” H*c provides the central turning point with language that reflects back to H*b and forward to H*b*. While emphasizing the exceeding level of the pains reported in H*b, he calls them “exquisite and bitter,” setting up the language for the description of his newly received joy when stating “there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy.” 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*. And c and b* share *can be nothing so exquisite and so bitter/sweet*.

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. This simultaneously provides the common element linking H and H* on level 4, while maintaining the negating character of this section of the level-5 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 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 quote of one person by another in the Book of Mormon.²⁸ 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.

Structure 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*,
- c to *atone for the sins* of the world.
- 18 b* Now, *as my mind caught hold upon this thought*,

28. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” 126.

- 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-5 chiasm — the two halves of which define the narrative center of the level-4 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-4 chiasm is focused in this level-5 abb*a* type chiasm. Both a and a* include a 6th-level element that recalls Alma’s being “harrowed up by the memory of [his] sins.” 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 sixth and seventh 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.”

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, a Son of God” in Alma’s distant memory provides dramatic contrast to the totally personalized and immediate “O, Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me.” 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 7 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” — a realization that motivates true and lasting repentance.

Mapping the Rhetorical Structure of Alma 36

Because there are so many things going on at each juncture in this complex rhetorical structure, I have prepared Table #1 to summarize the rhetorical dynamics at each stage. The 17 level-4 elements of Alma 36 are arranged by pairs in the left-hand column, mirroring the organization of the preceding presentation. The second column identifies the semantic links between the paired elements that give the level-3 unit its structure. The third column states the rhetorical form(s) used in the substructure of each level-4 unit. In Hebrew rhetoric, there is no requirement that there be any syntactic relationship between the rhetorical forms of sub-units of parallel elements of a chiasm, but as column 4 shows, in Alma 36, only one of the eight pairs displays syntactic independence. Three rely on simple repetition, three feature parallel chiasms, and two creatively form a new inclusio or chiasm when aligned.

Analysis of Level-4 Sub-Units

Structure	Semantic Link	Rhetorical Forms of Sub-Units	Syntactic Relationship
A	“my word”	personal address	
A*	“his word”	ballast line	repetition
B	“that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land”	triplet	
B*		triplets with negation	repetition
C	Helaman should do as Alma has done in remembering the captivity of the fathers	inclusio marker and chiasm	repetition frames inclusio
C*		triplet, chiasm, inclusio marker	three sub-units of same inclusio
D	“Trust in God” and be “supported in trials troubles,” and “afflictions”	personal address and quatrain, chiastic unity with displaced doublets, and quatrain with ballast line	fourth element for climax
D*			

Structure	Semantic Link	Rhetorical Forms of Sub-Units	Syntactic Relationship
E	“born of God”	chiasmus	parallel 6-element chiasms
E*	“knowledge of God”	chiasmus	
F	antithetical: “destroy the church of God”	chiasmus	antithetical
F*	“bring souls unto repentance”	chiasmus	6-element chiasms
G	antithetical endings: “I fell to the earth”	chiastic storytelling	independent
G*	“I stood upon my feet”	triplet	
H	antithetical: “that I might not be brought to ... God”	6-element chiasm with 4 triplets	antithetical 6/5-element chiasms
H*	“my soul did long to be there”	5-element chiasm with ballast line	
I	antithetical: “racked with torment”/ “pains no more” repetition: “Jesus ... Son of God”	complex chiasm with 3 internal levels	positive and negative repetition

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 7th and 8th century BCE 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 not readily included in the traditional chiastic analysis of that chapter, 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. The explicit reference to the atonement of Jesus Christ at the precise center of the chapter-length chiasm emphasizes its essential role in God's salvation for individuals and nations.

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