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## Forty-Five Years of Chiasmus Conversations: Correspondence, Criteria, and Creativity

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# Forty-Five Years of Chiasmus Conversations: Correspondence, Criteria, and Creativity



**John W. Welch**

I am very happy to speak today about forty-five years of chiasmus conversations. Obviously, in forty-five minutes and moving at the rate of one year per minute, we won't be able to cover much of this interesting and rewarding part of my life.

We have just returned from an extended family bus trip, visiting many church history sites from Palmyra to Nauvoo. We had 52 people on our family bus. When people ask, "So how was the trip?" it is of course impossible to even begin to summarize all that happened on a ten-day trip. You know the feeling. Even showing people pictures doesn't convey a fraction of what it was really like. It's like trying to summarize a two-year mission in a 15-minute homecoming talk. Now let's talk about 45 years of academic and personal and spiritual experience—I hope you are not expecting too much of me this morning.

Although I have not made a career of chiasmus (I don't know anyone who has), chiasmus has made a career of me. And that was an intentional chiasm, by the way. Chiasm just won't leave me alone: I have four children, boy, girl, girl, boy. Looking back over hundreds of crucial conversations and marvelous experiences, both professional and personal, in serious settings and casual chatter, both friendly and skeptical, and mostly all positive and all helpful, I really only wish I'd done a better

job of documenting many, many more of them. I will only be able to mention a few of them today. All of the interest in chiasmus I see as positive. The worst thing that can happen to you is that you are ignored.

It's hard to believe that the discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon took place almost 45 years ago. I'm not that old! But indeed, it took place 45 years ago in Germany, in August 1967. A full account of that story is in the [2007 issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies](#), which was published at the 40th anniversary of that discovery.<sup>1</sup> (It and a lot of the other things I will be mentioning today are available free online on the Maxwell Institute website, [maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu), or the [BYU Studies](#) website.) Appropriately, this article has recently been translated and published in German under the title "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon in Germany."<sup>2</sup> The German Saints are proud that the discovery happened in Germany.

I've been asked to tell the story many times. I'm always happy to oblige. In many ways it epitomizes the entire 45-year sequel of continuing conversations. I shall try today to emphasize some rarely used contemporary documents and pictures to flesh out for you what happened.

The story begins in 1964 with my two freshman-year BYU Book of Mormon teachers: Hugh Nibley, who taught us all to recognize such things as early archaic forms of Arabic desert poetry in Lehi's couplets in 1 Nephi 2:9-10. My other Book of Mormon teacher was Robert K. Thomas, who was director of the Honors Program and taught the class "Bible as Literature" in the BYU English department. He studiously read and taught me to read the Book of Mormon broadly as literature.

In 1966 I was called to serve in the South German Mission. I spent all of my time in Bavaria. In 1967 I was transferred to Regensburg. This Roman and medieval city was very Catholic, rich in Catholic scholarship and publication. Dominated by this impressive cathedral, Regensburg was a center of the Counter-Reformation in southern Germany.

One day, I just happened to notice a poster on a bulletin board on Domplatz, right by the cathedral, announcing several lectures that were going to be given in the nearby Priesterseminar, a place where young men went to be Catholic priests. In those days we didn't wear name badges, so we could go incognito. One of those series of lectures was to be held every Friday morning on the New Testament.

Friday morning was our P-Day, missionary preparation day. I told my companion that I thought this would be a perfect way for us to spend our P-Day mornings. We had actually been encouraged in our mission to be involved in cultural events and to get to know people in the community, and I

thought this might be a good way to get some serious conversations with people about what Latter-day Saints believe about the Bible.

Living in the Gesantenstrasse, we were only two blocks from the Priesterseminar on Bismarck Platz. We went and found the classroom on the ground floor. It so happened that the professor had just read a book by a Jesuit, Paul Gaechter, about the literary art in the Gospel of Matthew and was very excited about it. Gaechter's book had been published in 1965 in the *Stuttgarter Bible Studien*, and Gaechter's argument was that Matthew was writing to trained Hebrew readers, and accordingly he used chiasmus. That was the first time I'd ever heard of the concept. [This book, by the way, has just recently been translated from German into English.](#)

I found this interesting enough that as we were on our way home, we stopped at one of my favorite places, the Pustet Buchhandlung, the bookstore, and they just happened to have a copy of this very rare book. There I read in the introduction what Gaechter had said. Here's the language that caught my eye: "Symmetry," he said (and there are lots of kinds of symmetry, all symmetries and all forms of balance are not necessarily chiastic) but for him symmetry "rises to *chiasm*, when the symmetrically arranged elements also correspond in content. . . . If the closed forms" (and by that he means they have a distinct beginning and end, a kind of inclusion) "if they are correctly identified . . . , this leads to important conclusions. First, the originator of closed forms was not a Greek," he said (I'm not entirely sure of that anymore, but for me, that's all I knew at that point), "was not a Greek but a Hebrew, since the arrangement of a literary (non-poetic) aspect of such forms can only be understood in the context of a Semitic background." Now, that may have been an overstatement, a slight one. But it's got a bundle of truth behind it as well.

As I read, I encountered, for example, Gaechter's configuration of Matthew's complete Gospel into seven parts.

At the center of the middle section is Matthew 13, where we find a verbal chiasm. All of this I found fascinating in its own right, and after reading Gaechter, I felt that I understood the Gospel of Matthew much better than I had before. I could even remember what was in each of the 28 chapters of Matthew. To me, that was payoff enough – that this was a tool that would help to understand the scriptures better.

But I had not looked for anything like this in the Book of Mormon until I was awakened early in the morning, on August 16, 1967, with a clear spiritual prompting that if chiasmus was anything like evidence of Hebrew style in the Bible, it must be evidence of Hebrew style in the Book of Mormon.

I got up and went to our study table, where my companion and I read in German to each other each night. I figured the purpose of this practice—it was a mission rule—was to reinforce each other’s bad German accents. But I sat down and opened the Book of Mormon, figuring I’d begin where we had left off the night before. I opened to Mosiah 4, then turned this page: Mosiah chapter 5. As I glanced down the left-hand column, these two German words stacked on top of each here: “Übertretung,” just jumped out at me. No good typesetter would ever leave a stack like this at the end of a line. But when you’ve got long German words, there’s not much choice sometimes. Well, it didn’t take long to see a pattern: “ausgelöscht” (meaning “blotted out”) repeated, “linken Hand” (“left hand”) repeated. I noted in the margin, “A, B, C, D, C, B, A.”

You are probably familiar with this particular passage in Mosiah 5. It has become quite well known. We have here six elements repeated in exactly the opposite order, everything doubled, and not for any particular reason, if it’s being written in good English or German. There would be no particular need for all this repetition except to emphasize what is right at the middle, that the only thing that will ever cause this covenant, that Benjamin has just made with his people, to be blotted out, is their own transgression.

King Benjamin makes this point, and it’s also significant to me that Benjamin began his discussion of preparing the way for the speech, by reminding us that he had required his three sons to learn to read the ancient languages, and that Benjamin himself had taught those sons concerning the records, which may well have included him teaching them this part of their rhetoric and literary tradition.

How central are passages like this? I quickly went back and read the entire chapter Mosiah 5, seeing that section of Benjamin’s speech as a chiasm. Flip back to Mosiah chapter 3, and you see chapter 3 verses 18-19 (the most often cited scripture from the Book of Mormon in general conference), and here you see the “natural man” and “atonement of Christ,” in chiastic repetition, all very easily spelled out.

And then, much later, when I had a computer to be able to count the number of words in King Benjamin’s speech, I wondered, how central is that key passage in the middle of King Benjamin’s speech? The computer counts 2,467 words before that central passage and 2,476 words after it. If that’s not the dead center of Benjamin’s speech, I don’t know what it could be.

If Benjamin’s speech is being written on scrolls or on foldout fig bark leaves of some kind so that the text is being unrolled or unfolded, this passage, which is the most important passage of Benjamin’s speech, would have been right in front of a person reading this scroll as they held out the two sides.

So the centrality may have served a function in their own culture, along with that purpose and others as well. They aren't thinking of us when they write this way, they are thinking of themselves.

Another little point to notice. In my missionary appointment book, it shows that not much happened on August 16th, the day I noticed the pattern in Mosiah. We didn't have any appointments that day, but we did go out tracting and used chiasmus as a door approach. A lady was out scrubbing her sidewalk and she looked at us as if to say, "Now I *really* know you Mormons are crazy." But the next day, August 17th, was the one-year anniversary of my starting my mission, so this happened on the dead center of my mission.

Conversations about this began immediately. We found and visited the professor whose class we had attended. We went to his office and he told us about a professor named Mussner, a New Testament professor, and he said he would be home on the 29th of August. He also gave us a couple of other referrals and told me I could contact Paul Gaechter at the University of Innsbruck. I did all of that.

Two days later on August 18, I wrote my weekly letter home to my parents. This time the letter was a little different than usual. Normally it was one page and it just said, "We went tracting and we got the door slammed in our face a lot." This time it said, "About all I can think about is a discovery I made on Wed. morning. It's a great idea and I'm really excited about it—we've shown it to professors and theologians and no one can refute it." . . . This discovery came from a combination of study and also"—as I say in the letter—"not without a big push from the Lord."

I soon had worked my way through 1 Nephi chapter 1, which has been analyzed by a lot of people in different ways. Then on Aug. 29 we visited Dr. Mussner, at the Theological Philosophical Hochschule. I showed him the chiasms I had found in Benjamin's speech. He recognized these as fine chiastic passages, but when he realized that they came from the Book of Mormon, he abruptly asked us to leave and showed us the door.

So I started writing letters. I wrote to Robert K. Thomas, my teacher. He answered quickly: "The literary form you mention is interesting and convincing." He referred me to a young graduate student named Curtis Wright. He thought maybe Curtis would have known something of this. He who soon wrote me back: "I have never seriously looked for chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," (and actually no one else had either) "although I must admit that the idea intrigues me."

So I wrote to the University of North Carolina press to see if I could get a copy of Nils Lunds book,<sup>3</sup> which the professor had referred us to. I learned that the book had been remaindered and I

bought it and in a couple of weeks it showed up. This book by Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, is at right on the top of my list of recommended readings on this subject.

Here, for example, I wondered, was chiasmus used only in the *New Testament*? That's all I had learned about so far and that was all Gaechter ever talked about and that's all this title indicated: *Chiasmus in the New Testament*. Was it used in the Old Testament? Would it have been known as early as the time of Lehi and pre-exilic Israel? There for the first time I found the chiasmus in Leviticus 24, one of the strongest examples of chiasmus in the Old Testament. In 1990 I used this chiasm in Leviticus about the trial of the blasphemer in speaking to the Jewish Law Association in Boston. One old rabbi came up to me afterward, very appreciative for what he had learned, but then stammered: "But why does a goyim have to show us these things in our own torah?!"

On August 14, 1968, a year after my discovery, on my way home from my mission, I did visit Paul Gaechter in his monastery in Innsbruck. We had corresponded a little. He gave me much more time than he had on his calendar and than he had planned, and in the end he sincerely blessed and encouraged me. He said, "You are a lucky young man. You have found a life's mission."

A month later, I was back in Provo, and that very first night after checking in at our dorm, guess where I went at 10 o'clock at night? Hugh Nibley's house. I knocked on the door. He kept me there late into the night, wanting to see everything I had ever read and found on the subject, and he agreed on the spot to be my mentor and eventually became my master's thesis advisor.

That fall I wrote an article about what I had learned, called "[Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon](#)." It was published in *BYU Studies* in 1969. I was an undergraduate, so I hope people will cut me a little slack for what I wrote there. Some of the statements have been, with time and further research, modified slightly, but the essence of the article is still good. And it stands as a landmark in LDS scholarship.

There I presented for the first time Alma 36. I know that the blogs have accused me of being obsessed with Alma 36. Obsession may be an overstatement, but what's wrong with being obsessed with Leonardo's Last Supper, or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, or any other masterpiece?

I remember a conversation with David Noel Freedman, the editor of the Anchor Bible series, at Truman Madsen's house in the early 70s. Freedman's specialty is Yahwistic poetry. He knew a little bit about chiasmus, and I was intrigued to show it to him. Together we read through Alma 36, every word, marking things as we went. After a reflective assessment, he commented: "Latter-day Saints

are lucky, this book is very beautiful.” So it has gone for 45 years: interesting conversations, insights, contacts, meetings, scholarly papers, dissertations, and friendships.

Freedman soon agreed to write the preface for the book *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, a book that Bob Smith and I worked on and had with us collaborators such as Yehuda Radday, from the Technion in Haifa; Jonah Frankel, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; Wilfred G. E. Watson, who was then at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. It was published in Germany at the Gerstenberg Verlag. Freedman’s final line in the preface has been echoed by scores of others since then. He said, Welch’s “introduction to the whole work is indispensable.” This book (minus the scripture index which Bob Smith did) is also available free on the Maxwell Institute web site.

I could go on with lots of other stories but we don’t have time. Just briefly, here are some examples: James Charlesworth told a graduate seminar that they really should think about the Book of Mormon more carefully—after all, I was in the room! He said, “You ought to read what Jack has written about chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, at least take it into account.” Shalom Paul, at the Hebrew University, tells me every time I meet him that he’s still using *Chiasmus in Antiquity* as a textbook in teaching Hebrew Bible at the Hebrew University. Father Angelico DiMarco, from Sicily, came and spent a week at my house in Provo. Recently, I served on the doctoral dissertation defense committee for Steven Scott, whose dissertation is on chiasmus in Mark at the University of Ottawa in Canada. And it seems like every day brings lots of new things like this.

I’d like to finish my time by touching on three topics.

## Research Aids

Number 1, you might wonder about all these letters and books and articles, and things like that. How can we get a hold of these? There is now in process a *Chiasmus Archive* in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU. It is more formally called the John W. Welch Chiasmus Papers. We’ve been working on putting this together for several years. John Murphy, curator of the 20th and 21st century Western and Mormon Americana collections, is the librarian in charge. I hope that it will become a permanent repository for every scrap of paper relating to chiasmus that has ever come across my desk. Right now the list references 700 different writers, many of them frequently. The register for the collection at this time, which is not yet complete, is already over 200 pages long. It is being refined and processed so that every scriptural reference, chapter and verse, in any of this material, will be keyed to the items, boxes and folders in the collection and I hope that this can all be scanned and eventually put on a chiasmus resources website. That’s a big project.



Jacob Milgrom's 3-volume masterpiece, his monumental study of the Book of Leviticus,<sup>4</sup> uses chiasmus dozens of times in extended passages. Leviticus has clearer and better chiasms than you will find almost anywhere. Most of these passages come from what Milgrom thinks to be the pre-exilic layer of priestly writings. Were these texts on the Brass Plates in that form? Perhaps.

Bernard Jackson's work<sup>5</sup> is well represented in the Chiasmus Archive. The lifetime opus of his works on the Code of the Covenant in Exodus 21-23 also uses chiasmus extensively. Jackson, president of the Jewish Law Association, a barrister in England, is interested in semiotics, how texts and meaning really work. So chiasm is a tool that he likes to use. Not all scholars use chiasmus; no scholar uses every tool. Scholars use specialized tools that they particularly find interesting. You can find in the Chiasmus Archive all kinds of material that I hope will become useful for people. We invite further contributions. How do you get something into this collection? Just send it to me and it's going to end up in a stack and eventually in the collection. We will let you know more about that.

Out of this project came a chiasmus bibliography. More work has been done on that since Dan McKinlay and I published that 13 years ago.<sup>6</sup> The bibliography is [now available on the web](#). Many of the resources in the bibliography are available on the internet, and links are provided for those. We hope to everything in the bibliography, which is 197 pages long, to be available, although there may be a fee on the other end. It will be a dynamic bibliography and it's growing all the time. My dream is that all this might be converted someday into what I would call the Chiasmus Archive Academic Center (the CAAC—right, it's chiastic, and intentionally so).

## Getting Up to Speed on Chiasmus

Obviously, in order to really say anything responsibly about chiasmus from a scholarly perspective, a vast amount of research and reading needs to be undertaken. People ask me what the basic reading list might be. If you ask other people, you will get a different list. For the purposes of you here today, here is where I would send you, my top seven publications:

1) Nils Lund's book, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*.<sup>7</sup>

2) The 1981 anthology *Chiasmus in Antiquity*.

3) My article "[Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus](#)." It has been cited often enough in scholarly literature as a basic approach. In it I propose fifteen criteria for judging whether a passage should be judged chiastic or not. It's not good enough just to say a passage is chiastic, we also have to say how strongly chiastic it is. I propose a way in which people can calculate

and compute what I call the degree of chiasticity of a passage. Not all chiasm are created equally. Some are good, some are long, some are short, some are filled with miscellaneous repetitions. But some are really good. I view myself like a judge at the Olympic gymnastics or diving competition and score everything on a 10 to 1 basis. Some get an 8.3; some get a 2.3. The strength of a chiasm is important in knowing how much weight you can give that chiasm to support conclusions of all kinds. It helps determine what the factors are that you might look at as you wonder whether a passage is worth talking about in terms of chiasmus.

The first thing you have to worry about is **objectivity**. Is it precise? Is the order actually there? Is it clearly evident? Is it objectively observable? Does it depend on distant parallels or clever linkages? If so, it may still be chiastic, but maybe not very strongly. In Alma 36, there are 26 key words or phrases that are virtually identical in the first half and in the second half. It's a strongly objective text.

Purpose is the second thing. Is there a reason why an author might be doing this, or is it arbitrary? If there is an identifiable, literary reason why the author might have employed chiasmus, I think that strengthens the plausibility of the text being used for hermeneutic or interpretive purposes. Is it full of meaningful contrasts? Does it aid in memorization? Is it the kind of text that one would be giving at a formal setting, such as King Benjamin's speech? Alma 36 is a formal setting where he's giving his final blessing to his oldest son. The informal accounts of Alma's conversion, such as in Mosiah 27, use other forms of parallelism, such as antithetical parallelism. So in a formal setting you are going to get more formal types of presentation. In Alma 36, when you think of purpose, you are all familiar with the turning point there, how Alma wants to tell the story of his conversion. It was the turning point of his life. It's hard to find a better literary tool for conveying the thrust of that monumental shift in his life than the kind of splendid chiasm that he has laid out for us. It turned everything in his life and world around.

Number three, boundaries. Do you have clear beginning and ending points? If something just starts up randomly in the middle of who knows where, that's not a strong beginning and maybe not a strong ending. But if you have a clear demarcation of beginning and ending, is there a unit, and does the chiasmus operate on the entire unit? That's important. Many of the examples of chiasmus in random other places, and even in the Doctrine and Covenants, fail this test. Because, yes you can find repetition, but if you don't have a beginning and an end and some organized operation on some unit, it's just a weaker presentation. Natural barriers are significant.

Number four, competition with other forms. If this is the only form that's operating in a text, rather than other sorts of things going on, then it's more likely that the author is intending to put that effect into place.

Hickory, dickory, dock.  
 The mouse ran up the clock.  
 The clock struck one,  
 down he run.  
 Hickory dickory dock.

Is that a chiasm? Well, maybe, but it's mostly a limerick. You have a competition with another form that at least weakens that example.

Length: in some ways the longer the stronger. In other ways, the longer, more drawn out, the weaker because long passages offer greater opportunities for finding what you are looking for. After all, you can find long chiasms in the telephone book if you are willing to look at enough pages until you find names appearing in the opposite order. If length is combined with density, then you have a stronger presentation.

Dominance: is the chiasm focusing on important words? Are these the main points in the passage, or are they trivial, ordinary words? The more dominant, the stronger.

Mavericks: do you have stray uses, repetitions of the same word that occur outside of the system? For example in Mosiah chapter 5 we have the left hand of God. You don't want to be found on the left hand of God. Some people say "you have a lot of repetition in the Book of Mormon, so sure sooner or later you are going to find chiasms. How many times does left hand of God appear in the Book of Mormon? Twice. Once in Mosiah 5 verse 10 and once in Mosiah 5 verse 12. So, there are no mavericks; there's nothing outside of the system that would compete with the idea that this is being intentionally used. Is it purposeful reduplication or just random repetitions?

Centrality: the more important words you have on the center, the stronger it is.

Balance: if the two halves are roughly equal to each other, that's good. Balance is not absolutely necessary. It doesn't have to always be precisely balanced, but the stronger cases will be.

Climax: do you have a turning point? Is there some purpose? Usually chiasms want to build up to a point and then turn and come back down. That's not the way we like to write books or movies.

You like to build up to a climax, and then, wham, it's all over. In classical writing and in the ancient world, it was more important to build up to a crisis and then you have the denouement and the working out of that. And the working out of it is just as problematic and interesting and important as how you got into the problem. You usually want to have a turning point that is somewhere in the middle, a sense of return and completion after you have gone on this journey. Has there been a reason for it? Do you now understand better at the end than you did at the beginning?

Compatibility with the overall style of the writer: When you look at a writer who is using something like this or other forms of parallelism, that helps to say, "This is the kind of thing he might also have done on other occasions."

And finally, aesthetics. If an author is really fluent with the use of a form, and a really good artist is one who can use a form so masterfully that the form itself does not draw attention to itself, and it can even go for centuries without being noticed, because it is just such a good text. It just feels good the way it plays out.

**Criteria** is an area that scholars spend a lot of time worrying and working on. Nils Lund started in 1942 giving us his seven laws of chiasmic structure. Other people, like Joanna Dewey in 1973, gives us a list.<sup>8</sup> David Clark writes an article in 1975 on criteria for identifying.<sup>9</sup> Craig Blomberg, in 1989 (and yes, this is Steve Robinson's interlocutor in *How Wide the Divide*) sets forth **nine rules for chiasmus in his study of second Corinthians**.<sup>10</sup> And others. John Boda gives **thirteen very helpful cautions** for identifying potential weaknesses or errors in rhetorical analysis of chiasmic passages.<sup>11</sup>

Most of these problems, if you have a sense of these rules and apply them carefully, allow you to analyze particular passages and avoid broad sweeping statements of any kind about the strength or value of chiasmus. It's much more profitable to take and look at a particular passage and just deal with that, rather than trying to make general statements that usually are oversimplifications.

4) My fourth recommendation is found in Noel Reynolds's book, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, where you will find an article entitled "**What does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove.**" Too many people looking at chiasmus only wonder if it proves the Book of Mormon is true. It's an important aid to us in taking the book seriously. And yes, it shows that the book is consistent with some ancient style that Joseph Smith probably had no idea of. But does it prove the Book of Mormon? Only by circumstantial arguments, yes. But it's very valuable and one of the strongest arguments that we have. But beyond that I'm much more interested in other things that it proves. It proves that the book is not chaotic or devoid of form, it's orderly. This is something even Mark Twain didn't pick up.

He thought you take all the “it came to passes” out and you have a small pamphlet. It appears to be carefully written. One may assume that planning went into that.

Chiasmus may also show that a text is more profound, logical, or creative than some have assumed. The chiasm in Alma 41 in which Alma first gives a list of pairs and then repeats it with a pair of lists in the opposite order is very creatively used in describing the balanced jurisprudential concept of restorative or talionic justice, as I used it in speaking to the Jewish Law Association. It says that good will be restored for good and evil for evil. That’s a very profound and elegant argument and something you would miss if you didn’t notice the structure there.

Chiasmus can enhance one’s appreciation for the book’s text. It may not be your American or modern idea of beauty, but beauty is usually, to an important extent, in the eye of the beholder.

In the case of the Book of Mormon, it at least shows that the Nephite records are consistent with the claim made by the book that it was translated from a Hebrew-based original. As one of the few literary forms that can easily survive translation, chiasmus may give us some clues about how the Book of Mormon was translated.

The chiasm in Helaman 6:7-13 seems to make clearer sense in Hebrew than in English, when the name of Zedekiah and the word Lord (echoing the theophoric suffix in the name Zedekiah) stand at the dead center of the chiasm in the annals for the 64th year of the reign of judges. The land south was called Lehi, the land north was called Mulek, which was after the son of Zedekiah. For the Lord did bring Mulek into the land north and Lehi into the land south. Now there’s a lot simpler way to say that: “God brought Lehi to one and Mulek to the other.” But it’s done to show the balance here because the purpose of reporting the 64th year of the reign of judges was that there had finally begun to be correspondence and communication and trade between the land north and the land south. For the first time, people were going back and forth between these two lands, and the record for that year wants to show the reciprocity and the balance of those two lands. And at the middle you have Mulek being the son of Zedekiah. At the end of the word Zedek, the iah suffix is the theophoric name of Jehovah, or Lord, for the Lord. You see a double Lord, right there in the middle of that turning point. This chiasm, therefore, actually works better when you translate it back into Hebrew, which I think is an interesting point.

Of course, chiasmus, broadly understood, is not used exclusively in Hebrew, but far and away scholars find it to be more prevalent, more purposeful, and more demonstrable in Hebrew than in any other languages or literatures. The vast majority of articles and books in the chiasmus bibliography

deal with chiasmus in the Bible. If it were found in comparable frequencies in other literatures, one might expect to find a great deal more written on that subject in other literatures. So my point here is that chiasmus actually gives evidence of much more than merely the origin of the Book of Mormon or of any other text. Critics have said that “chiasm loses all of its persuasiveness as evidence for the divinity of the Book of Mormon when one realizes that it is a literary device which can occur quite naturally in non-divine writings as well.” But the point of chiasm in the Book of Mormon is not that it is exclusively found in divine writings or Hebraic writings, but rather that it is there at all: it is something that Joseph Smith wouldn’t have known about, and yet something that properly belongs in a text with ancient Hebraic roots.

5) My number 5 recommended reading is my article in the FARMS Review back in 2003. It is entitled, “[How Much Was Known About Chiasmus in 1829?](#)” As I show in detail there, chiasm was not completely unknown in 1829, but I see no evidence that Joseph Smith actually knew of it. One cannot say, and we don’t need to say, that there was no chance at all that Joseph knew of chiasmus, or that he couldn’t have somehow intuitively sensed it from the Bible, but this all seems extremely unlikely to me. On the one hand, it is always going to be impossible to prove a negative, but on the other hand, at some point the likelihood becomes small enough that the burden of proof or of persuasion shifts to those who deny an unlikely point.

Some people have suggested that Joseph Smith read extensively and knew the literature in his neighborhood. But his mother always said that he was not bookish, and even if he wanted to check books out in the Palmyra Library, he left Palmyra in 1826 to live in Harmony, Pennsylvania, or Fayette, New York, where I do not think there were any local libraries. Moreover, I have kept looking for evidence that John Jebb’s *Sacred Literature* (London, 1820) or either of the two books published by Thomas Boys in London in 1824 and 1825, all three of which deal boldly and innovatively with the idea of chiasmus in biblical literature, ever made their way to the United States before 1830. To what I have already written, I add the following: The evidence is extremely minimal. Jebb is cited in a collection of essays published in England and reprinted in Boston in 1823, and cited again in a literary and evangelical magazine published in Virginia in 1825, but neither of these citations have anything to do with chiasmus. The 1823 publication laments the difficulties encountered in trying to reduce Hebrew poetry to metrical schemes such as those used by the Greeks, citing Jebb only for the proposition that Bishop Lowth’s emphasis on Hebrew parallelisms (Lowth never mentioned chiasmus) had some followers but was also opposed by others. The other reference to Jebb in the 1825 magazine in Virginia deals only with the book of Jonah and “whether forces of nature can cause things to rise to the surface of waters or sink into their depths at their pleasure.” While this author found the facts of natural history to be truly remarkable in casting considerable light on difficult scriptures,

Jebb's work on introverted parallelisms went completely unnoticed here. The first time that an actual copy of Jebb's book appears to have found its way into a library in the United States was in 1833, when it is listed in a supplement to the catalogue of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Boys's 1824 *Tactica Sacra* is not to be found anywhere in any library listing that I am aware of before 1830 in the United States. The first time that his 1825 *Key to the Book of Psalms* is listed in any library holding is in 1838, in the catalogue of the Library of the Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts. Horne's *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* first mentions chiasmus in its 1825 edition, whose first listing is in the catalogue of the Library of Congress in Washington in 1830. This book was published in Philadelphia in a stereotyped edition, but it is unclear whether it was actually published there in 1825 or slightly later after the stereotyped plates had been shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. Interestingly, Joseph Smith once owned a copy of Horne's 1825 work, but the handwritten note on the inside of the cover shows that he acquired it in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1833. The books by Jebb and Boys were reviewed and discussed in three British periodicals. I have found copies of these periodicals in the Bodelian Library at Oxford and at the British Library in London. The 1827 catalogue of Books in the Boston Atheneum shows that the journals *British Critic* and *Eclectic Review* were on their shelves, and the *British Review* was in the Library of Congress in the 1820s, and they reviewed the works of Jebb and Boys. So if Joseph Smith had made a trip to either Washington or Boston he might have been able to find some information about chiasmus, but the fact that chiasmus is scarcely mentioned elsewhere makes it highly unlikely that he ever learned anything about it or that it was a topic of common conversation anywhere in his world. Nine libraries in the United States and Canada now hold Boys's *Key to the Book of Psalms*; even today, only one library today, the Dallas Theological Seminary, holds *Tactica Sacra*; and fifteen American libraries currently hold Jebb's *Sacred Literature*. While further checking is still in order, only a few of these libraries were in existence in the 1820s, and it appears that they all acquired subsequent editions of these books at a later time. And even if Joseph had in some way learned about chiasmus, it assumes a great deal to think that he could have created these chiastic subtleties in the text of the Book of Mormon as he went translating without notes and references back to previous portions of a passage or book. Some have blithely dismissed the idea that these literary structures are remarkable. One blogger suggests that Joseph Smith could easily have sat with his face in his hat and produced such chiasms. But then I think of the monumental task of dictating in Ether 1: the thirty-name list of Jaredite kings running from Ether back to Jared and then turning around and telling the history of those thirty kings and others in precisely the opposite order from Jared back down to Ether. This doesn't sound to me like some kind of a hat trick.

I mentioned that Joseph is doing this while he is writing and dictating. People wonder about his head in the hat and this seems to be a bit embarrassing. But I think he is doing that so he can block out the extraneous light, so he can concentrate on what he is seeing, spiritually. He's not seeing anything

with a normal focal length, which is only going to be an inch and a half from his eyeball to the top of his hat. Your eye can't focus on anything that close. But it's not so much an embarrassment if we think what this really tells us is that he is indeed, as Emma said, not using any notes as he is dictating this material. Think of the task. This isn't really a chiasm, but it is a type of reversal, a mere image. Take the beginning of the Book of Ether, where Joseph goes through that Jaredite king list. Thirty names starting with Ether and going back, back, back, back, to Jared. And then what does the rest of the book do? It starts with Jared and goes through, tells a lot of things along the way, but interspersed is a reference to every one of those thirty names in exactly the opposite order. Somebody knows that king list and is using it as the background of the Book of Ether. That is pretty remarkable. I think it's the same with a lot of these chiasms. Are you going to remember exactly the order and exactly how this worked? Not too likely.

Finally, on my list, would be the two crucial articles by Boyd and Farrell Edwards in *BYU Studies* and free on [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).

6) Edwards and Edwards in 2004 published "[Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?](#)" It shows that most examples of chiasmus have a fairly high probability that they could have occurred by chance. The strongest, however, come from the Old Testament (Lev 24) with its probability of appearing by chance being 0.0025 or the Book of Mormon (Alma 36) with its probability being 0.00018 (1.8 in 10,000), much smaller than any other proposals.

7) Their sequel was published in 2010, entitled "[When are Chiasms Admissible as Evidence?](#)" It argues and offers tests showing that only chiasmus that pass the objective test of the standard level of statistical significance, being  $p = 0.05$ , should be admissible as evidence in debates over Book of Mormon origins. Again, none of the best examples outside the Bible or Book of Mormon pass that test. To be meaningfully a part of these continuing conversations, readers will want to become as familiar as possible with these materials and with many more items in this dynamic and expanding library.

Those would be my seven recommended readings.

## Personal Reflections

All of the materials which will be found in the Chiasmus Archive represent a wide variety of views and experiences. Among biblical scholars, there are those who find and use chiasmus as a powerful and legitimate tool for interpretation, while others are skeptical and are less interested in literary analysis in general and chiasmus in particular. Some find it to be a great vine that yields occasional



clusters of fruit; others find it a weed that needs to be pruned back. In my own garden, I notice that it takes a lot of vine to produce good tomatoes.

This diversity of views is always to be expected: some people are more interested in other kinds of rhetorical criticism, historicism, political and economic analysis, theological or narrative analysis, and many other sorts of studies. Yet chiasmus is one of those tools that often pops up and proves useful, whether one is interested in hermeneutics, source criticism, authorship analysis, or theology.

Even among those who use chiasmus, views may vary about which way it cuts. For example, people in reading Luke 22 feel that the bloody sweat text (which is absent in the early Greek manuscripts of Luke) when absent results in a good chiasm, but other people see an even stronger chiasm in the passage if the bloody sweat text is present, which has led some people to believe that the bloody sweat text was originally present in Luke 22 in a nicely constructed chiastic pattern and then was deleted for other, probably theological, reasons.

In addition to the high-level academic material found in the chiasmus archive, many letters and emails in the Archive reflect the reactions of amateurs to chiasmus. It seems that almost everyone has his or her own story and experiences that fuel their interests or perhaps knee-jerk opposition to the idea of chiasmus. Some rightly object to overstatements of chiasmus, but far and away, as I have received emails from people telling about when and where and from whom they first learned about chiasmus and why, that experience was exciting and unforgettable to them. For many people, this indelible event is one of the most memorable spiritual or personal experiences in their lives, and they can tell you exactly where they were when they first heard about it.

People sincerely say that they were overwhelmed by the experience, and for many reasons. They use words such as “amazing,” “comforting,” “confirmation of my testimony,” “exciting,” “wanted to know more,” “helped me understand that what I had previously thought of as just a lot of repetition in the Book of Mormon now appeared with literary elegance.” “I said, whoa! This is a miracle equal to the parting of the Red Sea.” “Fascinating to see the Bible and Book of Mormon going hand in hand,” thinking of Ezekiel 37, or seeing how chiastic structure provides “more depth in meaning through the use of synonyms.” “Absolutely riveting, excited, opened my mind and helped my testimony.” “Enlightening and important as well as plausible evidence.”

Some say that for them it was “the first evidence of the truthfulness and veracity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient record that they remember learning aside from their witness of the spirit that it was true.” Others see it as “a wonderful tool.”

Clark Fetzer said, "Since I was a literature major in college, the discovery was especially significant to me."

Eric Vogel wrote, "Intriguing, another confirmation of the veracity of the Book of Mormon. It's truth is burned into my heart. This evidence supports what I already know to be true." A confirmation is different than a proof. You already know it's true, but you have a confirmation of that. This evidence supports what I already know to be true.

Dianne Johnson says, this has increased "my understanding of the scriptures as beautiful literature, especially the Old Testament Prophets."

Dan Perry, "Very cool!"

Phil Snelgrove says, "I was astonished and impressed."

Dave Doering says it was "a delightful reminder of the art and culture of the Israelites that this mattered to them."

Donette Smith says, "Wonderful! Real testimony boost of the Book of Mormon to go along with the spiritual testimony."

Charles Hart just said, "Wow!"

And many other people who then have gone on to discover chiasms on their own are equally, if not more, excited. The motto of AYSO soccer is "everyone plays." And so it is with chiasmus; it is one of those ideas that anyone can think about and utilize. Although, just like AYSO soccer, not everyone plays at exactly the same level. Nor do they need to, as long as they are not trying to play in a professional league or at the Olympics. Everybody can play with this, but if you want to play in the big leagues, you've got to play by the rules.

Personally, I have found the study of chiasmus to be vastly rewarding, and I know an enormous amount of work remains to be done in this area. One may wonder why is this area of research so difficult to define, manage, control, and contain? The study of chiasmus is not like some other areas of academic research that are tidy and deal with a very discreet domain. Trying to find all that has been written or suggested in this area is like trying to gather pillow feathers scattered to the winds. The use of the web now is an enormous help, but this only expands the formidable task at hand. For example, a Google search of Welch Chiasmus in Antiquity resulted on Wednesday in 97,700 hits. A

search for the word chiasm alone, 758,000 hits. The numbers alone are daunting, and the variety and diversity of these materials is staggering.

Like few other areas of analysis, the world of chiasmic awareness and sensitivity brings together and partakes of both discipline *and* creativity, objectivity *and* subjectivity, statistics *and* aesthetics, working with general criteria *and* particular passages, seeing reflections both of physical nature *and* of spiritual experience, using rigorous methodology *and* serendipitous exploration, searching for regularity *and* being blown away by unexpected surprises. For all of this, I love this area of academic and spiritual work for its fullness and richness. Don't sell it short in any way, by overstating, misstating, or understating what it can mean. Remember that in some senses, making a bad argument is worse than making no argument at all. Of course, at the same time, making no argument at all is also just as bad as making no argument at all.

The study of chiasmus is vibrant, at home and abroad, and new books and articles keep coming out all the time. Like John Paul Heil's 2010 book *Chiastic Structures and Audience Response in the Epistle to the Hebrews*.<sup>12</sup> Or like Victor Rhee's article in the latest issue of *Journal of Biblical Literature*, "The Role of Chiasm for Understanding Christology in Hebrews 1:1-14."<sup>13</sup> Or Roland Meynet's 2010 structural analysis of the synoptic Gospels.<sup>14</sup>

Or, if you just want to kick back, you can do what the Charlottesville, Virginia, young single adult 3rd Ward did, and throw a chiasmic alphabet dance! Dance your way through the alphabet and back again.

I still enjoy the excitement and thrill of discovering a new chiasmic structure. Only recently have I noticed that, after giving the first four points in the Sermon on the Mount about salt, light, destroying the law or the prophets, and fulfilling the law, in 3 Nephi 12, Jesus himself turns around and takes up those same four points in exactly the opposite order in 3 Nephi 15-16: the fulfillment of the law, not destroying either the prophets or the law, being a light unto the remnant, and those who will not turn to Christ being as salt that has lost its savor. And then, again, in his recapitulation of the Sermon at the end of his first day with the people at Bountiful, Jesus reiterates the bookends at the beginning and ending of the Sermon on the Mount, revisiting them in the opposite order: in 3 Nephi 18:12-34, he speaks about being built upon the rock and not upon a sandy foundation, asking and being given, holding up your light that it may shine, and being blessed if there are no disputations. Points one and two come first from the end of the Sermon on the Mount, and points three and four from its beginning, all in the opposite order. That this might have occurred once in 3 Nephi 15-18 might have been accidental, but that it occurs twice seems much more purposefully a part of the record.

A couple years ago, when I was teaching my class on the legal cases in the Book of Mormon, I quoted to the class the legally required confession by Sherem in Jacob 7:19. Sherem, who was especially known for being learned and having a perfect knowledge of the language of the people and being able to use the power of speech, remarkably took the trouble to compose his deathbed confession chiastically. I think this reflects his sincerity, showing that he was willing to use his linguistic tools to try to undo what he had previously done by the power of the flattery and argumentation. He says that he fears, lied unto God, denied Christ, claimed to believe the scriptures, and then reverses his steps, for they [the scriptures], truly testify of him [Christ], and having lied unto God, he greatly feared. I hadn't seen that as a chiasm before. Imagine my smile as I shared with my law students, many of whom knew a little about chiasmus, that moment of discovery.

All this, 45 years later, still takes me back to August 16, 1967. I still wonder, what did Matthew really intend? I hope to ask Nephi, Sherem, Benjamin, Alma, or Joseph Smith if they were in any way aware of these patterns that seem to be discernible in these texts. But in the meantime, we are left to work with a set of variables to determine what I have called any proposed chiasm's "degree of chiasticity," as we try to do our best to answer these questions. Some chiasms are ordinary and relatively common, even insignificant; while others are priceless gems. But the higher the degree of chiasticity, the greater the likelihood that the chiastic structure is significant and may even have been created intentionally. On rare occasions, such as in Alma 36, an author might say, within an apparent chiastic frame, that his joy was as exceeding as had been his pain, thus alerting readers to the author's explicit comparison between the pain and joy sections of that composition. But in most cases, one must speak with less than absolute certitude in this area, but those passages with a high degree of chiasticity can be thought of as occurring in some sense intentionally, even if they have occurred out of habit, convention, subliminally or subconsciously, for presumably even those habits or conventions, at one point, were more consciously taught to, or adopted by, the author.

It may seem that some of these patterns are occurring by accident, but let me offer an explanation by going back to my days as a Dixieland musician and asking myself whether or not, when I played an ad lib solo, I was intentionally doing what I was doing? Dixieland solos are usually 16 measures long, and their rhythms, underlying melodies, and chord progressions are discernibly regular, but their licks and expressions are spontaneous and in that sense unconscious. One would not call Louis Armstrong's brilliant solos "accidental," but neither would one call them strictly "intentional." Something much like this may well be going on with authors who have attained a level of skill and artistry (such as Alma's very creative use of chiasmus in Alma 41) that may simply come out almost spontaneously, yet following patterns or conventions that had become so natural with the artist that the words just come out that way. As rhythm and blues are at home with certain types of musicians

than others, parallelism and chiasm are more a part of some languages and literatures than others, and careful listening and reading will reveal both. Indeed, it has been said that the mark of the greatest artists is that they can work within a form so fluidly and successfully that the form draws no attention to itself and may even go for centuries unnoticed.

I testify that the Book of Mormon is true, good, and beautiful. All it asks is that people give it a chance.

Let me just conclude with my testimony, which comes from hundreds of different avenues, spiritual and intellectual, of interaction with the Book of Mormon, now for over 50 years. I know this book to be true. I also know it to be good, beautiful and what this world needs now. As B. H. Roberts said, the primary source of testimony will always be the Holy Ghost, but to be known, the truth must be stated, and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true. Thus, he says, secondary evidences, such as chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, may still be of first-rate importance and mighty factors in the achievement of God's purposes, making all this well worth our prayerful and studied consideration. I pray that we will be able to state, to be articulators of the truth, on an informed, careful rigorous basis, that the truth may come out in all hearts, and in all minds, and that people will be excited about what is good and true in this world. And I ask that in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John W. Welch, "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007), 74-87, 99.

<sup>2</sup> "Die Entdeckung des Chiasmus im Buch Mormon in Deutschland," *Neal A. Maxwell Institut für religiöse Studien*, F.A.R.M.S. Band 7, 101–26. Bad Reichenhall: LDS Books, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1942); Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Boston: Hendrickson, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Milgrom's books are part of the Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, published by Yale University Press. They are *Leviticus 1–16*, *Leviticus 17–22*, and *Leviticus 23–27*.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard S. Jackson, "Models in Legal History: The Case of Biblical Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 18 (2003):1–30; Bernard S. Jackson, "The Nature of Analogical Argument in Early Jewish Law," *Jewish Law Annual* 11 (1994): 144.

<sup>6</sup> John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinley, eds., *Chiasmus Bibliography* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1942); Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Boston: Hendrickson, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1–3:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 3 (1973): 394-401.

<sup>9</sup> David J. Clark, "Criteria for Identifying Chiasm," *Linguistica Biblica* 35 (1975): 63-72.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Blomberg, "The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1-7," *Criswell Theological Review* 4.1 (1989): 3-20.

<sup>11</sup> M. J. Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity: Symmetrical Mirages in Nehemiah 9," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1996): 55-70.

<sup>12</sup> Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Rhee, "The Role of Chiasm for Understanding Christology in Hebrews 1:1–14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131.2 (2012): 341–62.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Meynet, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Miami: Convivium, 2010).