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Power through Repetition: The Dynamics of Book of Mormon Parallelism

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CHAPTER 11

POWER THROUGH REPETITION: THE DYNAMICS OF BOOK OF MORMON PARALLELISM

Donald W. Parry

Through the frequent employment of parallel lines, many of the inspired writers of the Book of Mormon presented their messages with great skill, variety, and power. They used the power of repetition in poetic parallelisms to convey their message of Jesus Christ and his gospel to their audiences, which include readers of the twentieth century.

To illustrate their achievement, I will introduce a few examples of three parallelistic structures: climactic forms, synonymous parallelisms, and alternating parallel lines.¹

Parallelisms² are words, phrases, or sentences that correspond, compare, or contrast one with another, or are found to be in repetition one with another. Parallelisms rarely feature rhymes, the repetition of corresponding sounds; rather, they present the repetition of ideas. For example, Robert Alter described one such structure as presenting a “parallelism of meaning, observed by the poet

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with what seems almost schematic regularity in the opening line, every component of the first half of the line being precisely echoed in the second half.”³ In his analysis of biblical poetry, James Kugel points out that the second half of the parallelism is “not expected to be (or regarded as) a mere restatement” of the first half, but is meant to “add to it, often particularizing, defining, or expanding the meaning, and yet hearken back” to it.⁴

In scriptural poetry there are various ways in which words or sentences are found to be parallel. Many Book of Mormon writers presented the word of God using two or more synonyms (or near synonyms), such as *heart/soul*, *statutes/commandments*, and *preacher/teacher*; antonyms, such as *holy/unholy* and *poor/rich*; and identical words or phrases, such as *light/light*, and *cry unto him/cry unto him*. In addition, the prophets created parallel lines by using reciprocals, such as *to retire/to sleep*, *to eat/to be full*, and *to sin/pain of conscience*; complementaries, such as *bows/arrows*, and *river/sea*; different inflections of the same root, such as *to judge, a judge, judgment*, and *judgment-seat*; gradations (that is, an increase or decrease of the sense or idea; we’ll look at examples below); and superordinates, such as *breastplates/shields*, *wine/drink*, and *gold/metal*.

Climactic Forms

The Book of Mormon features an unusual construction of parallel lines, which I call climax. Climax occurs when the same word or words are found in successive clauses or sentences. Climax may be called gradation because the structure of a passage presents a feeling of ascension, of going up from one level to the next by steps, with a climax at the end. Climax creates, through a duplication of words, a continuation of thought from one sentence to the next, which adds

power, through repetition, to the discourse while at the same time connecting the lines into an inseparable body. An example of climax is found in Moroni 8:25–26:

And the first fruits of repentance is
baptism; and
baptism cometh by faith unto
the fulfilling the commandments; and
the fulfilling the commandments bringeth
remission of sins; And the
remission of sins bringeth
meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of
meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation
of the
Holy Ghost, which
Comforter filleth with hope and perfect
love, which
love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall
come, when all the saints shall dwell with God.

(Terms and phrases that correspond to each other have been underscored for identification purposes throughout this paper.) The passage comprises several terms or phrases that are duplicated exactly; the terms *baptism* and *love* are each duplicated, as are the phrases *the fulfilling the commandments* and *remission of sins* and *meekness, and lowliness of heart*. Two sets of verbs are twice repeated in the passage—*cometh* and *bringeth*. In addition, the deific name / title *Comforter* corresponds with the name *Holy Ghost*. Several significant theological concepts are identified only once in the passage, including repentance, faith, hope, enduring to the end, prayer, and the idea of the saints dwelling with God.

Accompanying climax is the idea of an ascension of expression, from a beginning point to a climactic situation. For instance, in the passage just quoted, note that the series of duplicated phrases is introduced with repentance, an

essential step on the path of eternal life. The idea of repentance is followed by faith and baptism (“the first fruits of repentance”), then obedience and the remission of sins.

On several occasions the passage identifies result. For instance, the resultant quality of remission of sins is both meekness and humility (“lowliness of heart”), and it is due to one’s possession of meekness and humility that one is able to receive the Holy Ghost. Further, having the Holy Ghost enables an individual to possess hope and perfect love. The culmination/climax of the duplicated phrases is logically located at the end of the verse, where it is stated that the righteous will receive an eternal station with God. Again, note the resultant nature of the climax. The saints are able to dwell in heaven with God only as the result of their ascending through various steps, including repentance, baptism, obedience, meekness and lowliness of heart, the visitation of the Holy Ghost, and possession of perfect love.

Similarly, a climactic verse in Mormon 9:12–13 begins with the fall of Adam, but concludes with man being “brought back into the presence of the Lord.”

Behold, he created
Adam, and by
Adam came
the fall of man. And because of
the fall of man came
Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son; and because of
Jesus Christ came the
redemption of man. And because of the
redemption of man, which came by Jesus Christ, they are
brought back into the presence of the Lord.

This striking passage contains two types of gradational parallelisms, climax (a climax of words) and anabasis (a climax of rhetoric, or a climax of sense).⁵ The climax of words

is underscored and includes the duplication of the terms or phrases *Adam, the fall of man, Jesus Christ, and redemption of man*. Each is repeated twice, creating four parallel statements. The climax of sense is determined by examining the actual theological concept taught by the prophet. It begins with Adam and the fall, and concludes with Jesus Christ and the redemption of mankind. First came the creation of Adam, who caused the "fall of man" (in Hebrew, *Adam* means "man," "mankind"), which of necessity brought Jesus Christ and his atonement, through which came the "redemption of man," which enables Adam ("man") to return "back into the presence of the Lord." The verse's climax is clear: it is because of the eternal roles of Adam and Jesus Christ that men "are brought back into the presence of the Lord."

Climactic forms create a close relationship between the writer and the reader. In the first place, the writer presents to the reader a series of thoughts that by degrees become more intensive. The careful reader, upon seeing the gradations of thought, is held in temporary suspension, noting connections and associations between the word or phrase pairs, until at the end he perceives the climactic thought or phrase. In this way, the writer stimulates the reader by steps, bringing the reader along to a formal conclusion. Edward Greenstein summarizes this literary phenomenon in a single sentence: "The literary effect of climax is achieved through a series of dialectical cognitive processes: certainty of analysis (line 1), uncertainty and reanalysis (line 2), and confirmation of the reanalysis (line 3)."⁶ Wilfred Watson writes that the effect of climax is "to increase tension in the listener. Once his attention and curiosity have been aroused by the incomplete nature of the first [part], the listener feels compelled to learn the outcome."⁷

Synonymous Parallelisms

Simple synonymous parallelism consists of two lines, line two being a synonymous repetition, an echo, or a symmetrical counterpart of line one. In 2 Nephi 9:52 the prophet espouses the necessity of unceasing prayer, saying,

pray unto him continually *by day*,
and give thanks unto his holy name *by night*.

The command to pray continually is stated, then repeated in an emphatic manner—"give thanks unto his holy name by night." The antonyms *day/night* are contrastive, and yet build upon the theme of the verse—incessant prayer. The verbs *pray* and *give thanks*, together with the word pair *him/his holy name* add further parallels in this instructive passage. The repetition adds poetic power to the concept of praying "continually."

The writer of the following verse presents a woe oracle aimed at those who deny the works of God:

Wo unto him that spurneth at the *doings of the Lord*; yea,
wo unto him that shall deny the *Christ and his works*.
(3 Nephi 29:5)

The repetition of *wo* emphasizes the calamity, ruin, or distress that would befall the recipients of the woe oracle. The accusation is listed twice: *that spurneth at the doings of the Lord / that shall deny the Christ and his works*. Several other terms parallel one another, including the relative pronoun *that/that*, the deific titles *Lord/Christ*, the verbs *spurneth/deny*, and the nouns *doings/works*. The well-balanced pattern of two lines is connected with the affirmative particle *yea*, meaning "yes," or "not only this, but also. . ."

Often, synonymous constructions consist of three or more lines possessing identical or similar meanings. When Lehi

and his wife, Sariah, were stricken on board the ship crossing the sea, Nephi wrote this concerning them:

they were brought near even to be *carried out of this time to meet their God*;
 yea, their grey hairs were about to be *brought down to lie low in the dust*;
 yea, even they were near to *be cast with sorrow into a watery grave*. (1 Nephi 18:18)

Note the three expressions describing the aged condition of Nephi's parents and their proximity to death: *they were brought near to death, their grey hairs were about to be brought down, and they were near to be cast into the grave*. These three phrases are united with three different euphemistic expressions of death— *to meet their God, to lie low in the dust, and into a watery grave*—to make up a remarkable extended synonymous parallelism.

Alternating Parallel Lines

The Book of Mormon features scores of parallel statements consisting of four lines placed in an A-B/ A-B pattern. In this formation, the As correspond to each other, as do the Bs. The alternating parallel lines may consist of synonymous or antithetical words, word pairs, or phrases.

Mosiah 4:8 presents an example of the A-B/ A-B pattern:

A And there is none other salvation
 B *save this which hath been spoken of*;
 A neither are there any conditions whereby man can be saved
 B *except the conditions which I have told you*.

The corresponding phrases in the lines marked with A are *there is none* of line one and *neither are there* of line three;

the noun *salvation* (line one) parallels the verb *to save* (line three). The lines marked with *B* include the parallel phrases *save this which / except the conditions which*, and the expression *which hath been spoken of* is equal in value to the phrase *which I have told you*.

An example of alternating complementaries can be seen in Alma 1:26:

- A for the preacher
B was no *better than the hearer*,
A neither was the teacher
B any *better than the learner*.

The lines marked with *A* are equivalent. The term *preacher* is synonymous with *teacher*, and both words are marked with the definite article *the*. Alternating with the terms *preacher/teacher* are the complementary words *hearer/learner*. Without the hearer the preacher could not function properly; without the learner the teacher would not exist. Such is the way of complementaries: one without the other leaves an incomplete form. They are two parts that make a complete set, a whole. In this verse Alma alternated the word-pairs *preacher-teacher* and *hearer-learner* in a manner that is instructive.

At the heart of this simple alternate form of poetry are the word-pairs that parallel one another, alternated with other corresponding word-pairs. Many such alternated word-pairs exist in the Book of Mormon, including *eldest-youngest/Nephi-Lehi* (Helaman 3:21); *heavens-earth/throne-footstool* (1 Nephi 17:39); *Jews-Gentiles/Christ-Eternal God* (2 Nephi 26:12); *drunken-stagger/wine-strong drink* (2 Nephi 27:4); *secret-darkness/revealed-light* (2 Nephi 30:17); *river-sea/sand-gravel* (1 Nephi 20:18–19); *heart-soul/flesh-iniquities* (2 Nephi 4:17); *sons-daughters/arms-shoulders* (2 Nephi 6:6); and *soul-heart/sin-enemy* (2 Nephi 4:28).

Similarly, corresponding phrases are an important part

of alternating parallel constructions. Examples of these from the Book of Mormon include: *people of Coriantumr-people of Coriantumr/people of Shiz-people of Shiz* (Ether 15:6); *children of Nephi-descendants of Nephi/Zarahemla-Mulek* (Mosiah 25:2); *Coriantumr-Shiz/army of Coriantumr-army of Shiz* (Ether 15:13); *bodies-body/this life-eternal world* (Alma 34:34); *spirit and body-limb and joint/perfect form-proper frame* (Alma 11:43); *sucking child-weaned child/asp-cockatrice* (2 Nephi 30:14); and *lion-young lion/beasts of the forest-flocks of sheep* (3 Nephi 20:16).

On many occasions the writers of the Book of Mormon create alternating structures that go beyond the A-B/A-B simple alternate structures discussed above. Many constructions repeat the alternating lines three or more times, as in A-B/A-B/A-B, and so on. As in the simple alternates, the As correspond to one another, as do the Bs. The following verse features a number of prophecies concerning the crucifixion and burial of Jesus Christ, presented in the A-B/A-B/A-B/A-B pattern:

- A the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself,
- B according to the words of the angel,
- A as a man, into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up,
- B according to the words of Zenock,
- A and to be crucified,
- B according to the words of Neum,
- A and to be buried in a sepulchre,
- B according to the words of Zenos. (1 Nephi 19:10)

Four prophetic or God-inspired messengers declaring their witness of the sufferings of Christ are here represented—an angel (who is not identified), Zenock, Neum, and Zenos. The structure places the four messengers in four identical prepositional phrases (note the preposition *of*) preceded by four additional identical prepositional

phrases set forth as documentary citations (*according to the words*).

Placed in an alternating position with mention of the angel and the three prophets are four prophetic messages pertaining to the atoning sacrifice of the Lord. The theological message presented in the four statements (the *A* lines) summarizes the events surrounding the atonement. Jesus would yield himself into the power of wicked men and be “lifted up” and crucified and later placed in the tomb. Thus, we find in the *A-B/A-B/A-B/A-B* pattern, the prophetic message—the messenger, presented four times. In this manner, the message of the scriptures—the atonement of the Redeemer—is inseparably connected with those who carried the good tidings to mankind—the prophets.

Other alternating structures extend beyond the *A-B/A-B/A-B* pattern by placing additional alternating elements in the structure, as in *A-B-C/A-B-C* or *A-B-C-D/A-B-C-D*. Again, the *A* lines correspond to one another, as do the *B*s, the *C*s, and so on.

An example of the *A-B-C/A-B-C* pattern is found in Alma 5:19:

- A I say unto you,
- B can ye look up to God at that day
- C with a pure heart and clean hands?
- A I say unto you,
- B can you look up,
- C having the image of God engraven upon
your countenances?

In this verse, a repetition of the expression *I say unto you* makes up the two *A* lines. The *B* lines ask the question, *Can you look up?* Finally, the clauses *with a pure heart and clean hands* and *having the image of God engraven upon your counte-*

nances are synonymous—both speak of those possessing godlike characteristics.

Note the longer A-B-C-D-E-F/A-B-C-D-E-F pattern as recorded in 1 Nephi 9:3–4:

- Nevertheless, I have received a commandment of the Lord
- A that I should make these plates, for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven
- B of the ministry of my people.
- C Upon the other plates should be engraven
- D an account of the reign of the kings,
- E and the wars
- F and contentions of my people;
- A wherefore these plates
- B are for the more part of the ministry;
- C and the other plates
- D are for the more part of the reign of the kings
- E and the wars
- F and contentions of my people.

Once again, the *As* contain corresponding values, as do the *Bs*, and so on.

Another alternating structure that goes beyond the simple A-B/A-B pattern occurs when a climactic form also creates an alternating parallelism. The result is a pattern like this: AA-BB/AA-BB. The earlier example from Mormon 9:12–13 that moves from the fall of Adam to the climax of the redemption of man through Jesus Christ combines this climactic form with an alternating parallelism:

- Behold, he created
- A Adam, and by
- A Adam came

- B the fall of man. And because of
B the fall of man came
A Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son; and
because of
A Jesus Christ came the
B redemption of man. And because of the
B redemption of man, which came by Jesus Christ,
they are brought back into the presence of the Lord.

Through the alternating parallelism coupled with these climactic lines, Adam is seen as a character complementary to Jesus Christ, and the concept of the fall of man stands in antithesis to the redemption of man. Through Adam (the apostle Paul denominated Adam the “first man Adam”) came the fall of man, but through Jesus Christ (the “last Adam” [1 Cor. 15:45]), came the redemption of man. The parallels are evident: *Adam/Jesus Christ*, and *fall of man/redemption of man*. A similar passage is found in 1 Corinthians 15:22, where the elements *Adam/Jesus* and *die/alive* are found in the couplet. “For as in Adam all die, and in Jesus all shall be made alive.”

The Power of Repetition

One principal function attached to parallel lines is to accentuate a specific idea. A single, double, or even fourfold repetition of a concept adds great emphasis to the point being made and tends to set a marked impression on the reader. The impact on the reader is increased when lines are duplicated, when the concept of one line is echoed in another line, when the prophet states a theological concept and follows that idea with an interpretive paraphrase. Alter’s observation concerning Old Testament parallelisms applies to similar constructions found in the Book of Mormon. He says, “There would seem to be some satisfying feeling of empha-

sis, for both the speaker and his audience, in stating the same thing twice, with nicely modulated variations.”⁸ The cumulative effect of repetition is like multiplying witnesses; the reader is impressed with the strength of the message. Repetition punctuates the statement with a sense of certitude and finality.

Finally, a word concerning Book of Mormon authorship and parallelism is appropriate, given the theme of this volume. I have demonstrated the great variety of prosaic/poetic expression that exists in the Book of Mormon, referencing only three of many parallelistic forms present in the Book of Mormon (that is, climactic forms, synonymous parallelisms, and alternating parallel lines). Every single parallelistic unit of the Book of Mormon could be analyzed, as I have done to a small degree with the examples above, with the goal of viewing its mechanical composition—that is, its sentence or phrase construction (syntax), usage of certain words, contextual environment, and choice of the number and placement of verbs, nouns, adjectives, and so on. In addition, every parallelistic unit could be examined in order to find its poetical composition, speaking not only of the possible existence of rhyme, rhythm, meter, assonance, symbolism, and other known items attached to poetry, but of its poetic style (genre), religious themes that exist in the unit, its eloquent nature, or items that spark a high level of religious emotion or spiritually in the reader.

The Book of Mormon features hundreds of separate poetic units. Given the great number and variety of parallelisms featured in the Book of Mormon, with regard to form, mechanical, and poetical composition, it is evident to me that the volume was authored by a number of inspired individuals, each demonstrating his own personality and individuality in the poetic units he employs.

Notes

1. The title of this paper is inspired in part by the significant work of Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

There are, of course, many other forms of poetic parallelism in the Book of Mormon. For a treatment of antithetical parallelism, see Donald W. Parry, "Teaching in Black and White: Antithetic Parallel Structure in the Book of Alma, Its Form and Function," in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992): 281–90; for a discussion of chiasmus, see John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10/1 (1969): 69–84; and for an introduction of other poetic types, see Richard Dilworth Rust, "Book of Mormon Poetry," *New Era* (March 1983): 46–50, and Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns*, (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), i–li.

2. It is Bishop Lowth who is credited with calling attention to the importance and prevalence of biblical parallelisms. In his two-volume work entitled *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, he introduces the idea of parallelismus membrorum, or "parallelism of the members" (see Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* [Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms, 1787; reprint, New York: Garland, 1971]). In a later work, Lowth defines parallelism: "The correspondence of one Verse, or Line [is] Parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under it, equivalent, or contrasted with it in sense, or similar to it in the form of grammatical construction, these [are] parallel lines; and the words or phrases, answering one to another in the corresponding lines, parallel terms" (Robert Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation* [London: J. Nichols, 1795], ix).

3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 7.

4. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), 8.

5. "There is a *climax* where only *words* are concerned, and a *climax* where the *sense* is concerned. A *climax* of *words* is a figure of Grammar; and a *climax* of *sense* is a figure of Rhetoric. We have confined our use of the word *climax* to the former; as there are other names appropriated to the later. A Climax in Rhetoric is known as Anabasis (q.v.), where the gradation is upward; and Catabasis (q.v.), where it is downward" (E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book], 256).

6. Edward L. Greenstein, "Two Variations of Grammatical Parallelism in Canaanite Poetry and Their Psycholinguistic Background," *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 6 (1974): 100.

7. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 154.

8. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 9.