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Psalm 105: Chiasmus, Credo, Covenant, and Temple

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PSALM 105: CHIASMUS, CREDO, COVENANT, AND TEMPLE

Stephen D. Ricks

Abstract: *In this essay Stephen Ricks takes a close look at the literary structure of a psalm, reintroducing us to chiasmus both in modern and ancient texts, including the Book of Mormon, then uses this literary structure to show how the psalm contains the basic historic credo of the Israelites, as seen in Deuteronomy and mirrored in 1 Nephi 17. Ricks then goes on to show how an essential part of the psalm is a covenant (“a binding agreement between man and God, with sanctions in the event of the violation of the agreement”), which ties it back to the temple. Ricks shows this by pointing out the points of covenant: (1) Preamble, (2) review of God’s relations with Israel, (3) terms of the covenant, (4) formal witnesses, (5) blessings and curses, and (6) reciting the covenant and depositing the text. This form is maintained in Exodus 19, 20, 23, and 24, and in the Book of Mormon in Mosiah 1-6. Psalm 105 follows this form, too. In the sacrament prayers, which in Mormon’s understanding are covenants, points 1 to 5 are also present.*

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Psalm 105 provides an intriguing array of literary and theological themes: chiasmus, the historical credo, covenant, and — looming in the background, only occasionally mentioned but clearly understood and accepted — the temple. Each of these themes is eminently worthy of examination, and while I will discuss each, I will focus on the covenant in this psalm.

Chiasmus as a Poetic Form in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

Chiasmus is a poetic form based on reverse parallelism that is frequently found in the poetry of the ancient Near East as well as of the classical world — even, incidentally, in Sanskrit literature — as the studies edited by John W. Welch have shown.¹ Yelland, Jones, and Easton’s *Handbook of Literary Terms* defines *chiasmus* as “a passage in which the second part is inverted and balanced against the first. Chiasmus is thus a type of antithesis:

A wit with dunces, and a dunce with wits (Pope).

Flowers are lovely, love is flowerlike (Coleridge).”²

We can see an example of chiastic structure in the nursery rhyme, “Hickory, Dickory, Dock”:

- (a) Hickory, dickory, dock
- (b) The mouse ran up the clock
- (c) The clock struck one
- (b’) The mouse ran down
- (a’) Hickory, dickory, dock

The parts of the chiastic structure are indicated with the letters in parentheses. The central element of the chiasmus, “The clock struck one,” is indicated with a (C).

A chiastic pattern also emerges from Psalm 124:7, where we read:

- We are like a bird
- (a) Escaped from the fowler’s trap;
- (b) The trap broke
- (a’) And we escaped

Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. Among the numerous poetic patterns in the Book of Mormon³, chiasmus is perhaps the most intriguing. Alma 36 provides a striking example of an extremely sophisticated chiasmic structure. We will look at only the central section of the entire chiasmus that has been studied in painstaking detail by Welch⁴:

- (k) Born of God (26)
- (l) I sought to destroy the church of God (6–9)
- (m) My limbs were paralyzed (10)
- (n) Fear of being in the presence of God (14–15)
- (o) Pains of a damned soul (16)
- (p) Harrowed up by the
memory of sins no more (17)
- (q) I remembered Jesus
Christ, son of God (17)
- (q') I cried, Jesus,
son of God (18)
- (p') Harrowed up by the
memory of sins no more (19)
- (o') Joy as exceeding as was the pain (20)
- (n') Long to be in the presence of God (22)
- (m') My limbs received their strength again (23)
- (l') I labored to bring souls to repentance (24)
- (k') Born of God (26)

The center point of the chiasmus is remembering “Jesus Christ, son of God” (q = v. 18) and crying out to him (q' = v. 18), after which he was “harrowed up by the memory of (his) sins no more” (p' = v. 19).

Chiasmus in Psalm 105. Psalm 105:2–5, 7–10, particularly in the Hebrew text, provides instances of three series of intricately overlapping chiasms (following the pattern **a, b, c, c', b', a2, a', b2, a3, b2', a2', b3, c3, c3', b3', a3'**) — the chiasmic elements are italicized below.⁵

2 Sing praises to him: speak of all (**a**) *his wonders (niphlaotaw)*.

3 Rejoice in his holy name: let the heart of those who (**b**) *seek (mevaqqeshe)* (**c**) *the Lord (YHWH)* be glad.

4 Search out (**c'**) *the Lord (YHWH)* and his might; (**b'**) *seek (baqqeshu)* his presence constantly.

5 (a2) *Remember (zikhru)* (**a'**) *the wonders (niphleotaw)* he has performed; his miracles, and (b2) *the judgments (mishpete)* of his mouth ...

7 He is the Lord our God: in all (a3) *the earth (ha-arets)* are (b2') *his judgments (mishpetaw)*.

8 He (a2') *remembers (zakhar)* (b3) *forever (le-'olam)* (c3) *his covenant (berito)*, the word he commanded for a thousand generations,

9 Which he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac;

10 And they established it for Jacob as a law, for Israel as (c3') *a covenant (berit) (b3') forever ('olam)*:

11 Saying, to you I will give (a3') *the land (erets)* of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance.

The chiasms in Psalm 105:2-5, 7-10 display a pattern of overlapping phrases of richly subtle complexity. The central element in the first chiasm (Psalm 102:2-5) is “the Lord” (Psalm 102:3-4); the last phrase in the first chiasm, “the wonders,” follows “remember,” the first phrase of the second chiasm; the first phrase of the third and last chiasm, “the earth,” falls in the center of the second chiasm; the central element of the second chiasm is “judgments”; and the central element of the third chiasm is “covenant” (vv. 24-30).

Psalm 105 as Historical Credo

The “Historical Credo” in Deuteronomy in Ancient Israel. The historical credo⁶ is a literary recollection of the experience of the patriarchs in the land of Canaan, of the experience of the children of Israel in bondage in Egypt, of their deliverance from bondage, and of their journey to the land of Canaan. An outstanding instance of the historical credo is the following from Deuteronomy 26:

You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: “My father was a fugitive Aramaean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord ... The Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deuteronomy 26:5-9 JPS).

The historical credo is outlined more briefly in Deuteronomy 6:

When, in times to come, your children ask you, “What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you?” you shall say to your children, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand.” (Deuteronomy 6:20-21 JPS).

Historical Credo in Psalm 105. The “historical credo” in Psalm 105 recounts Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’s experience of wandering and the promise to Jacob of the land of Canaan as “an allotted heritage”:

He is the Lord our God; His judgments are throughout the earth. He is ever mindful of His covenant, the promise he gave for a thousand generations, that he made with Abraham, swore to Isaac, and confirmed in a decree for Jacob, for Israel, as an eternal covenant, saying, “To you I will give the Land of Canaan as your allotted heritage” ... They were then few in number, a mere handful, sojourning there, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another (Psalm 105:7-13 JPS).

The Historical Credo in the Book of Mormon. Strikingly, Nephi recites a form of the historical credo to his brothers Laman and Lemuel while building a ship in Bountiful, relating to them the account of the liberation of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt and their passing through the waters of the Red Sea:

Now ye know that the children of Israel were in bondage; and ye know that they were laden with tasks, which were grievous to be borne; wherefore ye know that it must needs be a good thing for them, that they should be brought out of bondage. Now ye know that Moses was commanded of the Lord to do that great work; and ye know that by his word that the waters of the Red Sea were divided hither and thither, and they passed through on dry ground (1 Nephi 17:25-27).

Psalm 105 as a Covenant Text

Covenant — a binding agreement between man and God, with sanctions in the event of the violation of the agreement — is the central focus of this essay⁷. In what follows, I discuss the meaning of covenant (Heb. *berit*), the individual elements of the covenant-making ceremony, Israelite covenant-making ceremonies, and the covenant in Psalm 105.

Meaning of Heb. *berit*, “Covenant.” The Hebrew word *berit*, meaning “covenant” may be related to Akkadian *birit*, “between, among,” = Heb. *ben*, “between,” suggesting the mutuality of the covenant. Alternatively, Heb. *berit* may also be related to Akkadian *biritu*, “clasp, fetter” (with which one may compare the Talmudic Hebrew *byryt*, suggesting a “binding settlement.”⁸ Both of these etymological associations suggest a binding mutual agreement between man and God.

The Covenant Ceremony: Elements of the Covenant.⁹ The covenant-making and covenant-renewal ceremony contain a number of individual elements, each of which will be explained further:

1. “Preamble,” in which the participants in the covenant are introduced
2. “Review of God’s Relations with Israel,” in which God’s mighty acts on behalf of his people Israel are recounted
3. “Terms of the Covenant,” that is, the commandments that the people are called upon to observe
4. “Formal Witness,” in which the people themselves, or an object, such as a stone, are made a witness to the covenant
5. “Blessings and Curses,” in which the consequences for obedience or disobedience to the commandments are given
6. “Reciting the Covenant and Depositing the Text”: Scripture frequently mentions that the covenant was read aloud; other passages mention that the covenant was written down and put in a safe place.

Covenant-Making Ceremony in Exodus. Both Exodus 19 and 20 (as well as a brief passage in Exodus 23 and 24)¹⁰ provide outstanding examples of covenant-making ceremonies with their individual elements (the relevant passages will generally be cited separately without additional comment):

1. Preamble

And Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel (Exodus 19:3).

God spoke all these words, saying: (Exodus 20:1).

2. Review of God’s Relations with Israel

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself (Exodus 19:4).

I am the Lord thy God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Exodus 20:2).

3. Terms of the Covenant

Now therefore, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is mine, but shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak unto the children of Israel (Exodus 19:5-6).

Strikingly, the “Ten Commandments” (Exodus 20:3-19) constitute the “terms of the covenant” of the events that occurred on Mount Sinai — they do not stand alone with no connection to other actions or events at that time. Thereafter, the text continues with more laws until Exodus 23:19, followed by the “blessings and curses” and “reciting the covenant and depositing the text.”

4. Formal Witness

And all the people answered together, and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do!’ And Moses returned the words of the people to the Lord (Exodus 19:8).

And they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient (Exodus 24:7).

5. Blessings and Curses

Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions; for my name is in him (Exodus 23:20-21).

6. Reciting the Covenant and Depositing the Text

Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and put before them all that the Lord had commanded him (Exodus 19:7).

And Moses came and wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the

hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 24:4).

And [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people (Exodus 24:7).

Covenant in the Book of Mormon. King Benjamin’s address in Mosiah 1-6 is a striking instance of an Israelite covenant-renewal ceremony in a Nephite setting, containing all the elements of a traditional Israelite covenant-making or covenant-renewal ceremony. Each of the individual parts of the covenant-renewal ritual — “preamble,” “review of God’s relations with the people,” “terms of the covenant,” “formal witness,” “blessings and curses,” and “reciting the covenant and depositing the text” — are to be found in King Benjamin’s sermon:

1. Preamble

These are the words which [Benjamin] spoke and caused to be written, saying ... (Mosiah 2:9).

Benjamin elaborates further by stating that the words he is delivering to the people were made known to him by an angel (and, thus, originate from God): “And the things which I shall tell you are made known unto me by an angel from God” (Mosiah 3:2; cf. Mosiah 4:1).

2. Review of God’s Relations with Israel

In this “review of God’s relations with Israel,” Mosiah describes his own actions toward the people as though they were God’s relations with them:

Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness; and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you. And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne — and of all these

things which I have spoken, ye yourselves are witnesses this day (Mosiah 2:13-14).

3. Terms of the Covenant

And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if you would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land; and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you (Mosiah 2:22).

4. Formal Witness

And they all cried with one voice, saying: ... we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:2, 5). Further, “king Benjamin thought it was expedient, after having finished speaking to the people, that he should take the names of all those who had entered into the covenant and taken upon them the name of Christ,” and “there was not one soul, except it were little children, but who had entered into the covenant and had taken upon them the name of Christ (Mosiah 6:1, 2).

5. Blessings and Curses

And it shall come to pass that whoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ.

And now it shall come to pass that whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God (Mosiah 5:9-10).

6. Reciting the Covenant and Depositing the Text

[Benjamin] “appointed priests to teach the people, that thereby they might hear and know the commandments of God, and to stir them up in remembrance of the oath which they had made” (Mosiah 6:3).

Covenant in Psalm 105. Covenant is described in Psalm 105:7-11:

He is the Lord our God; His judgments are throughout the earth. He is ever mindful of His covenant, the promise he gave for a thousand generations, that he made with Abraham, swore to Isaac, and confirmed in a decree for Jacob, for Israel, as an eternal covenant, saying, ‘To you I will give the Land of Canaan as your allotted heritage’ (JPS translation).

Covenant is described here as an everlasting promise made by God to Abraham and Isaac and reconfirmed to Jacob of the inheritance of the land Canaan by their posterity forever. But we need to understand the covenant passage in Psalm 105 in light of the much richer covenant tradition: the covenant tradition and covenant pattern are intrinsic parts of the life and history of ancient Israel. And, like many of the psalms, covenant is closely linked to the temple.

Additional Note: The Covenant Pattern in the Sacrament Prayers. As a final note, we may see the sacrament prayers as a type of covenant-renewal ceremony (with baptism as the original covenant-making ceremony), represented with the great majority of elements of the covenant ceremony. The prayer itself (in D & C 20:77; cf. v. 78 and Moroni 4 and 5) represents the “reciting of the covenant,” with the text of the prayer recorded in the scriptures:

O God, the Eternal Father (*Preamble*)

we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ,

to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it (*Blessings and Curses*)

that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son (*Review of God’s Relations*)

and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father (*Formal Witness*)

that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son (*Terms of the Covenant*)

and always remember him (*Terms of the Covenant/Review of God’s Relations*)

and keep his commandments which he hath given them (*Terms of the Covenant*)

that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen (*Blessings and Curses*)

Conclusion

Psalm 105 displays many features that may be found in the rich ancient Israelite literary and historical tradition, among them chiasmus and the historical credo. But covenant (and, by implication, the temple), also a part of Psalm 105, has its own very rich tradition in ancient Israel, which resonates with Latter-day Saint tradition as well.

Notes

1. John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim, Germany: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981). John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinlay, *Chiasmus Bibliography* (Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999) provides an exhaustive bibliography of chiasmus in ancient literature .
2. H. L., Yelland, S. O. Jones, and K. S. W. Easton, *A Handbook of Literary Terms* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 32.
3. For numerous representative studies of literary aspects of the Book of Mormon, see Daniel B. McKinlay and Scot Hanson, “A Selective Bibliography of Book of Mormon Literary Features,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/2 (2007): 88-91; cf. also Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo: FARMS, 1998).
4. John W. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 117.
5. A. R. Ceresco, “A Poetic Analysis of Ps. 105, with Attention to Its Use of Irony,” *Biblica* 64 (1983): 21–44; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-50*, rev., *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 2002), 55–56; Ceresco, “The Function of Chiasmus in Hebrew Poetry,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 1–10.
6. On the “historical credo,” see Gerhard von Rad, *Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 11-12; Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Exodus, Sinai, and the Credo,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965): 101–13; Frederick Danker, *Creeds in the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966); J. Schreiner, “Die Entwicklung des Israelitischen ‘Credo,’” *Concilium* 2(1966):757-62; J. Thompson, “The Cultic Credo and the Sinai Tradition,” *Reformed Theological Review* 27 (1968): 53–64; Dennis J McCarthy, “What Was Israel’s Historical Creed?” *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1969): 46–53; J. P. Hyatt, “Was There an Ancient Historical Credo in Israel and an Independent Sinai Tradition?” in Harry F. Thomas and William L. Reed eds.,

Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Hebert Gordon May (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 152–70; J. I. Durham, “Credo, Ancient Israelite,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 197–99; B. Lang, “Glaubensbekenntnisse im Alten und Neuen Testament,” *Concilium* 14 (1978): 499–503; ISTI, “Wie aus Erzählung ein Bekenntnis wird: Das Credo Israels — Eine Kurzformel des Glaubens,” *Entschluss* 38 (1983): 24–26; Bozo Lujic, “A Small Historical Credo or Anamnesis as Historical Remembering? Exegetical-Theological Analysis of Deut 2:5–10,” (Croatian) in *Bogoslovska Smotra (Ephemerides theologicae Zagrebienses)* 78/1 (2008): 106-7 (English abstract).

7. The first scholar to examine the elements of the ancient Near Eastern treaty (discovered among the Hittites) was Viktor Korosec in *Hethitische Staatsverträge* (Leipzig: Theodor Weicher, 1930), 12-14. The link between Hittite treaties and Old Testament covenant passages was first suggested by Elias Bickerman in “Couper une alliance,” *Archives d’histoire du droit oriental* 5 (1950-51):153; reprinted, with an additional note, in Elias Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, Part One (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 23, and were developed and expanded by George Mendenhall in “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954):50-76. The literature on the treaty/covenant pattern in the ancient Near East and ancient Israel is very extensive. Dennis J. McCarthy, in *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), provides a painstaking study of ancient Near Eastern treaties and their relationship to the covenant passages in the Old Testament as well as a thorough bibliography. Valuable overviews of covenant may be found in Delbert Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969); Id., *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1964); Klaus Baltzer, *Covenant in Old Testament, Jewish and Early Christian Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant,” in Keith Crim, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, J. Arthur Thompson, “Covenant (OT),” in ed. Geoffrey Bromiley, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:790-93; Gary Herion and George Mendenhall, “Covenant,” in ed. David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1179-1202.

8. Moshe Weinfeld, "Berith," in eds. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, tr. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), vol. 2:254-55; further, see Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, tr. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1994), 1:157, which provides the etymology "fetter" from the Akk. *birtu* and Eg. *bi-ra-ta* and "between" from the Akk. *birit*, although they also observe that the etymology is "uncertain."
9. The specific names for these categories are my own, but they are similar to those in other treatments of the treaty/covenant pattern, including my own in "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1-6)," *BYU Studies* 24/2(1984):155-59; J. A. Thompson, "The Near Eastern Suzerain-Vassal Concept in the Religion of Israel," *Journal of Religious History* 3(1964):1; G. Herion and G. Mendenhall, "Covenant," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:1182. The individual elements of the covenant-making ceremony are from my essay, "King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1-6," in ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 215-19.
10. The covenant ceremony encompasses Exodus 20:1-24:8.

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