

Anchored by Ancient Patterns: Chiasmus and Other Evidence of the Book of Mormon

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The Book of Mormon, a foundational text for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), has long been the subject of scholarly debate regarding its origins. Critics often attribute its authorship to Joseph Smith, while believers maintain it is a divinely inspired translation of ancient records. Central to this debate is chiasmus—a sophisticated literary structure involving inverted parallelism—which aligns with ancient Near Eastern writing traditions. This essay explores how chiasmus in the Book of Mormon serves as both a literary artifact and a theological witness, offering compelling evidence for its authenticity as an ancient text while underscoring its central message of Jesus Christ’s redeeming mission.

Joseph Smith’s Background and Witnesses

Joseph Smith (1805–1844), the first prophet and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was born into a humble farming family in Sharon, Vermont. His family later relocated to Palmyra, New York, a region deeply influenced by the religious excitement of the Second Great Awakening. Conflicted by the competing religious claims around him, fourteen-year-old Joseph sought guidance directly from God. In response, he received a profound vision—now known as the First Vision—in which God the Father and Jesus Christ personally appeared to him, instructing him not to join any existing churches and foretelling the restoration of Christ’s original church upon the earth (Joseph Smith–History 1:15–20).

In 1823, at age seventeen, Joseph Smith was visited by the angel Moroni, who revealed the existence of an ancient scriptural record engraved on golden plates, buried in the Hill Cumorah near his home. Following four years of spiritual preparation and instruction from Moroni, Joseph received custody of these sacred plates in 1827. Despite limited formal schooling and minimal resources, Joseph translated the plates by what he described as the “gift and power of God,” dictating the extensive, intricate text—known today as the Book of Mormon—in roughly sixty-five days (Joseph Smith–History 1:30–54). The remarkable speed and complexity of this work continue to raise significant challenges to those who suggest the text was merely fabricated.

Importantly, Joseph Smith’s testimony did not stand alone. Three primary witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—testified publicly and repeatedly that an angel showed them the plates and that they personally handled and examined them (Smith, 1976, 2:55). Elder Dallin H. Oaks emphasized the integrity of these accounts: “Yet to the end of their lives...not one of these witnesses deviated from his published testimony or said anything that cast any shadow on its truthfulness” (Oaks, “The Witness,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 36). Their consistent testimonies strongly support the authenticity of Joseph Smith’s translation.

Following the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon in March 1830, Joseph Smith formally organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 6 of that year. Guided by ongoing divine revelations, Joseph continued to lead the restored Church, translating additional scriptures and establishing doctrinal clarity. Despite facing continuous persecution and ultimately martyrdom in 1844, Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry firmly established a foundation for a global faith centered on Christ's teachings, restored truth, and continuing revelation.

Counterarguments and Scholarly Critiques

Subjectivity in Chiastic Identification

Critics like Earl Wunderli argue that chiastic analyses risk "forcing" patterns onto texts, selectively omitting verses that disrupt symmetry. David Noel Freedman warns against overzealous pattern recognition, noting that humans naturally seek order even in randomness. While valid, these critiques do not negate the prevalence of extended, coherent chiasms in the Book of Mormon, such as Alma 36, which meets Lund's intentional design criteria.

Cultural Diffusion and Joseph Smith's Exposure

Some scholars propose that chiasmus entered the Book of Mormon via Smith's exposure to biblical passages. However, the text's chiasms often exceed biblical complexity in length and thematic depth. For instance, Alma 36 spans an entire chapter, a scale uncommon in the Bible. Additionally, Smith's limited education makes it improbable that he could replicate such structures subconsciously.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) has engaged in various efforts to explore and validate the archaeological and textual roots of the Book of Mormon. While the church primarily views the Book of Mormon as a spiritual text, it also supports scholarly research into its historical claims. Here are some of the key efforts:

Archaeological Efforts

Mesoamerican Research: Many scholars within the LDS Church have focused on Mesoamerica as a potential setting for Book of Mormon events. Researchers like John Clark have highlighted correlations between Mesoamerican archaeology and Book of Mormon narratives, such as the use of cement in ancient structures and the presence of cities and temples.

Old World Connections

The church has also noted archaeological findings in the Old World that align with Book of Mormon narratives, such as the discovery of the NHM altar in Yemen, which corresponds to the Book of Mormon's account of Nahom.

Textual and Linguistic Research

"Reformed Egyptian": The Book of Mormon states that its original text was recorded in "reformed Egyptian," a phrase not found in other historical records. Scholars suggest that this description likely refers to a script derived from Egyptian characters but adapted specifically to express a Semitic language such as Hebrew. While direct archaeological evidence of "reformed Egyptian" has not been discovered, the practice of modifying existing writing systems to suit different linguistic purposes is historically well-documented and consistent with ancient scribal traditions.

Hebrew Onomastics:

Further supporting the ancient authenticity of the Book of Mormon is the presence of Hebrew onomastics—the study of names and their linguistic origins. Scholars have identified numerous names within the Book of Mormon that possess clear Hebrew linguistic roots and structures, consistent with ancient Israelite naming conventions rather than nineteenth-century American naming patterns. Names like "Lehi," "Nephi," and "Sariah" have been examined extensively, revealing strong linguistic ties to ancient Hebrew (Tvedtnes, Gee, & Roper, "Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 2000, 9:40–51). Such onomastic evidence provides subtle yet compelling support for the book's claim of ancient Israelite origins.

Additionally, the Book of Mormon's complex literary structures—most notably chiasmus—echo patterns widely recognized in ancient Near Eastern texts. Chiasmus, characterized by symmetrical inverted parallelism, was common in Hebrew literature but largely unknown and unappreciated during Joseph Smith's lifetime. Its detailed presence within the Book of Mormon thus strongly suggests authentic ancient authorship rather than modern invention. Taken together, Hebrew onomastic patterns and sophisticated literary structures like chiasmus form a powerful evidentiary framework that reinforces the historical and spiritual claims of the Book of Mormon.

Institutional Support from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Several organizations provide valuable support for Book of Mormon research, encouraging deeper understanding of its historical and spiritual background. Brigham Young University (BYU), along with the Neal A. Maxwell Institute (previously called FARMS), actively sponsors research and scholarly discussions on the Book of Mormon. They publish papers and host discussions that explore archaeological discoveries, linguistic evidence, and literary analysis—all designed to shed light on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and its ancient roots.

Another helpful organization is Book of Mormon Central, which makes scholarly findings accessible to everyone. They publish clear, readable articles and videos that explain how historical findings connect with Book of Mormon events. Their work helps me—and others—understand how archaeological discoveries and scholarly research can support personal faith and enrich our study of the Book of Mormon.

Challenges and Limitations

Even with strong literary evidence and promising archaeological findings, there are genuine challenges in conclusively proving the Book of Mormon's historicity through archaeology alone. Critics rightfully point out that many of the archaeological discoveries, while fascinating and supportive, aren't direct evidence connecting explicitly to specific Book of Mormon events. For example, although the discovery of the NHM inscription strongly suggests a link to "Nahom," skeptics argue this alone doesn't definitively confirm the entire narrative.

Additionally, no direct archaeological evidence has yet been found for the "reformed Egyptian" script mentioned by Mormon (Mormon 9:32). This remains an open question, making it hard to satisfy critics looking strictly for tangible proof. Brad Wilcox points out a practical reality: "We often forget that records from ancient civilizations in the Americas were largely destroyed by colonizers, making the archaeological record far from complete" (Wilcox, "Because of the Messiah in a Manger," BYU Speeches, Dec. 2019). In other words, gaps in evidence aren't necessarily proof of falsehood; rather, they highlight the limits of what archaeology can currently offer.

Recognizing these limitations doesn't weaken my faith—quite the opposite. It reminds me that archaeology is just one piece of the puzzle. Ultimately, the Book of Mormon's truthfulness isn't meant to hinge solely on physical evidence; it invites each reader to seek their own personal confirmation through spiritual reflection and prayer (Moroni 10:4–5).

Archaeological and Historical Correlations

Archaeological findings have provided intriguing support for the Book of Mormon's historical claims. Helaman 3:7 references cement construction, corroborated by archaeological discoveries in ancient Mesoamerican architecture (Clark, "Archaeological Trends," BYU Studies). Additionally, inscriptions found in Yemen bearing the letters "NHM" correspond to the Book of Mormon location "Nahom" mentioned in 1 Nephi 16:34 (Black, Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon, 82). Such findings strengthen the plausibility of the book's ancient origins by connecting textual details to verifiable historical contexts.

Distinct Authorial Voices and Literary Techniques

The Book of Mormon features distinct authorial voices, literary styles, and narrative intricacies, all of which support the claim of multiple ancient authors rather than a single modern fabricator. Stylometric analyses, which evaluate subtle linguistic patterns and word usage, reveal consistent and recognizable differences among various Book of Mormon authors, such as Nephi's poetic language, Mormon's editorial interjections, and Alma's passionate sermons (Welch, "Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited," 206). Brad Wilcox further emphasizes this point, observing that "the varied personalities, teaching styles, and rhetorical approaches found within the Book of Mormon indicate clearly distinct voices, each shaped by unique life experiences and historical contexts—something beyond the capacity of a single nineteenth-century writer" (Wilcox, "Because of the Messiah in a Manger," BYU Speeches, Dec. 2019). Recognizing these authentic differences not only bolsters claim of ancient origin but also enriches the text, providing deeper insights into the individual prophets, their challenges, their cultures, and their profound devotion to Christ.

Literary Devices:

The Book of Mormon's extensive use of Isaiah serves as a powerful link between Old Testament prophecy and the text's own narrative, emphasizing Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. Nephi, an early writer, quotes Isaiah at length to underscore the fulfillment of prophecies concerning the Messiah and to provide spiritual guidance to his people. Notably, some Book of Mormon passages diverge from the King James Version of Isaiah, occasionally aligning with older biblical manuscripts. For instance, 2 Nephi 12:16–17 (Isaiah 2:16–17) contains variations that reflect an alternate manuscript tradition, suggesting that the Book of Mormon may preserve readings not found in later biblical texts. This phenomenon supports the idea that the Book of Mormon draws from an ancient source predating the standardized biblical texts available in Joseph Smith's time. As Nephi himself notes, "the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you; nevertheless, they are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy" (2 Nephi 25:4). This emphasis on spiritual understanding highlights the role of Isaiah's prophecies in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, reinforcing their shared theological themes and underscoring the divine purpose behind these scriptures.

Allegories:

The Book of Mormon employs vivid allegories such as Jacob's Olive Tree (Jacob 5). This extended allegory parallels Old Testament prophetic imagery and symbolizes God's relationship with Israel, emphasizing scattering, gathering, and covenant restoration (Black, "Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon," 2014, 122–124). Similarly, symbolic objects like the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10) are physical manifestations of divine guidance, echoing biblical motifs such as the pillar of fire and cloud guiding Israel (Exodus 13:21–22).

Symbolism:

Rich symbolism enhances the Book of Mormon's spiritual teachings, making profound truths accessible and memorable. A compelling example is Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life (1 Nephi 8), where the tree symbolizes God's love and the eternal blessings of Christ's Atonement. The path to the tree, accompanied by an iron rod, symbolizes adherence to the word of God, guiding believers safely through life's distractions and challenges. Elder Neal A. Maxwell beautifully articulated the power of this symbolism, stating, "The tree represents the love of God and is the greatest of all gifts" (Maxwell, "Lessons from Laman and Lemuel," *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 6). Such potent symbols provide readers not only with doctrinal insights but also with emotional and spiritual anchors, reinforcing personal commitment and faith.

Metaphors:

The Book of Mormon skillfully employs metaphors to deepen understanding and inspire personal reflection. A prime example is Alma's metaphor comparing faith to a seed, vividly illustrating the process of spiritual growth and nurturing (Alma 32:28). Alma encourages believers to actively cultivate faith, highlighting the potential for growth, strength, and eventual spiritual fruition. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland describes this metaphor as "one of the most vivid and powerful illustrations of faith found in any scripture," emphasizing its capacity to guide individuals toward deeper spiritual conviction and personal commitment (Holland, "Christ and the New Covenant," 1997, 169).

Hebrew Parallelism:

Hebrew poetic structures, such as synonymous and antithetical parallelisms, richly permeate the Book of Mormon text, adding both depth and rhythmic emphasis to its teachings. Synonymous parallelism, where an idea is expressed in successive lines using different but equivalent words, and antithetical parallelism, where contrasting ideas clarify and reinforce a message, are abundant throughout the text. For instance, Mosiah 3:25 exemplifies synonymous parallelism clearly: "And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations,

which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment." Donald W. Parry, a noted scholar of Hebrew literary structures, observes, "The Book of Mormon is replete with Hebrew poetry and parallelisms, which constitute substantial evidence of ancient Hebrew influence" (Parry, "Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon," 2007, 45). Such poetic devices not only highlight the book's historical authenticity but also enhance its emotional and spiritual resonance, deepening readers' comprehension and personal reflection.

Narrative Complexity:

The Book of Mormon's narrative complexity, evidenced by its multi-layered structure and editorial interjections, further supports its authenticity as an ancient record. Mormon, as editor, compiled diverse records spanning centuries, explicitly stating his methodology (Words of Mormon 1:3–5). This intricate editorial framework and compilation process is more consistent with ancient historiography than with the straightforward narratives expected of a single modern author (Hardy, "Understanding the Book of Mormon," 2010, 10–12).

Chiasmus: Historical Background and Significance

Among the most compelling evidences for the Book of Mormon's ancient authenticity is chiasmus—an intricate Hebrew literary form involving symmetrical inverted parallelism (A-B-C-B'-A'). Scholar John W. Welch rediscovered chiasmus in the Book of Mormon in 1967, emphasizing that its presence strongly suggests an ancient Hebrew context unknown to Joseph Smith's contemporaries. Welch states, "The presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon is an external witness that the book is...a translation of an ancient text" (Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies*, 1997, 199).

Alma 36 exemplifies chiasmus at its most sophisticated, centering specifically on Christ's atonement and Alma's transformative spiritual experience. The complexity and precision of this chapter's structure exceed known biblical examples, indicating intentional ancient authorship rather than modern fabrication. This sophisticated literary technique emphasizes the Book of Mormon's doctrinal core, reinforcing its spiritual authenticity and historical credibility.

Theological Implications: Christ as the Central Focus

Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon consistently elevates Jesus Christ as the source of redemption. In Alma 36, the plea for mercy ("O Jesus, thou Son of God") anchors the narrative, symbolizing the believer's reliance on divine

grace. Similarly, King Benjamin's sermon centers on the transformative act of taking Christ's name, reflecting the LDS emphasis on covenant-making as a path to sanctification.

This structural focus on Christ aligns with the book's self-declared purpose: "to the convincing of Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ" (Title Page). By embedding theology within literary form, the text invites readers to engage intellectually and spiritually, recognizing Christ's role as the literal and figurative pivot of salvation history.

Personal Reflection and Spiritual Witness

Studying the Book of Mormon has profoundly shaped my personal faith journey, extending far beyond discovering chiasmus. Learning about archaeological findings, like Nahom, provided a tangible connection to the ancient world, deepening my sense of the text's historical reality. Engaging with the distinct authorial voices brought clarity to my understanding of prophetic individuality, demonstrating how God works uniquely through different personalities and circumstances. Additionally, the metaphors and symbols, such as Alma's seed and the allegory of the olive tree, spoke to me personally, illustrating spiritual truths in relatable ways. Each discovery strengthened my belief that God's wisdom and purpose permeate every aspect of scripture, guiding me toward greater trust and deeper spiritual reflection. This ongoing scholarly and spiritual journey continually affirms my testimony of the divine origins and profound relevance of the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion: Chiasmus as a Witness of Authenticity

The presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon presents a multifaceted case for its ancient origins. Structurally, it mirrors Near Eastern literary practices unknown in Joseph Smith's era. Theologically, it centers Christ's Atonement as the core of its message. While scholarly debates persist, the cumulative weight of evidence—stylometric diversity, archaeological correlations like the NHM altar in Yemen, and the text's intricate design—challenges simplistic theories of 19th-century authorship.

For Latter-day Saints, chiasmus is more than an academic curiosity; it is a testament to the book's divine purpose. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland affirmed, the Book of Mormon is "the keystone of our religion," its complexity affirming its role as a witness of Christ. In a world skeptical of faith, the deliberate architecture of its text offers both logical and spiritual reassurance, inviting all to "come unto Christ" (Moroni 10:32) through its pages.

The accumulated evidence—credible eyewitness testimonies, archaeological discoveries, distinct literary voices, sophisticated literary techniques, and especially chiasmus—creates an overwhelmingly compelling case for the Book of Mormon's authenticity. The intricate use of chiasmus serves as a powerful illustration of the unity between

scholarly analysis and spiritual conviction. Ultimately, the Book of Mormon invites readers not merely to accept scholarly arguments but to experience personal spiritual confirmation. As Moroni promised, through sincere study and prayer, each person may know "by the power of the Holy Ghost" the truthfulness and divine origin of this sacred text (Moroni 10:5).