

# Chiasmus and the Book of Mormon

By Sandra Tanner

Some LDS writers are trying to establish the historicity of the Book of Mormon by maintaining that it contains a poetic style, sometimes used in the Bible, called *chiasmus*. They also point out that this style was not identified as *chiasmus* until after the time of Joseph Smith. Thus, they reason, his use of it in the Book of Mormon demonstrates that it is a translation of an ancient text. However, a brief investigation shows just the opposite.

First, this poetic style has always been in the Bible. Whether anyone had a name for it or not is beside the point; the style was present for Joseph Smith to imitate.

Second, the *Doctrine and Covenants* has examples of the same pattern. Since Joseph Smith dictated the revelations in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and it is not claimed that they were translations of ancient writings, obviously this pattern was part of Smith's style. The *Pearl of Great Price* and Joseph's diary exhibit similar patterns.

A thesis at BYU by Richard C. Shipp, "Conceptual Patterns of Repetition in the Doctrine and Covenants and Their Implications" (Masters Thesis), arrives at a similar conclusion. Although Mr. Shipp was not trying to disprove chiasmus claims in the Book of Mormon, his study shows that Joseph Smith had picked up both the rhythm of chiasmus and parallelism. In his 1832 first vision account, Joseph claims that he had studied the Bible since he was twelve, so it is quite conceivable he picked up this style from his studies.

In the October 1989 *Ensign* article, "Hebrew literary Patterns in the Book of Mormon," there is mention of a book on Hebrew poetry, dated 1787, which discusses the poetic style of parallelisms. The term *chiasmus* is never used, but this book clearly shows that Hebrew poetic styles were recognized and studied even before Joseph Smith's time.

LDS scholar Blake Ostler, in reviewing the book *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, commented:

The wordprint analysis by Wayne Larson and Alvin Rencher questions once again the theory that Sidney Rigdon or Solomon Spaulding authored the Book of Mormon (pp. 158-88). This theory continues to surface, though thoroughly discredited, because of the suspicion that the prodigious narrative, theological insight, and biblical knowledge manifest in the Book of Mormon were beyond Joseph's limited education and mental abilities. In computer studies of noncontextual word frequencies to measure unconscious language patterns, word groupings from nineteenth-century authors were clearly distinguishable from Book of Mormon word groupings. Further, the individual Book of Mormon prophets had distinct and contrasting styles from one another. Such decisive findings may give pause to even the most vehement critics of the Book of Mormon and put to rest once and for all the theory that either Sidney Rigdon or Solomon Spaulding authored it.

David D. Croft, a University of Utah statistician, has questioned the validity of Larsen and Rencher's major premise that an author-specific wordprint exists ("Book of Mormon Wordprint Examined" *Sunstone* [March-April 1981]: 15-21). Notwithstanding well over a dozen studies cited by Rencher and Larsen supporting this premise, Croft's skepticism is supported by studies on the works of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. According to Howard Hong, an expert on Kierkegaard's writings, computer studies demonstrate that the Danish philosopher could adjust his wordprint in relation to various pseudonyms he assumed in his works, though perhaps not as frequently or distinctively as those in the Book of Mormon.

Croft criticized the first version of the wordprint study printed in *BYU Studies* by asserting that a wordprint could not survive translation. This criticism is answered in the *Book of Mormon Authorship* version. Wordprints of twelve German novellas translated by a single translator demonstrated a statistically significant difference that was not altered by the translation (p. 177).

However, the issue of translation raises a problem of internal consistency in *Book of Mormon Authorship*. In order to make sense of applying a wordprint analysis, one must assume that the "translation process was both direct and literal, and that each individual author's style was preserved" (p. 179). However, for B. H. Roberts to explain nineteenth-century anachronisms and King James Bible quotations he had to

assume that “Joseph’s vocabulary and grammar are as clearly imposed on the book as a fingerprint on a coin” (p. 13). If the expressions and ideas in the Book of Mormon are partly the result of Joseph’s attempt to communicate the translation, then the nineteenth-century theological ideas and biblical quotations can be explained as a result inherent in the translation process. If these expansions are indeed Joseph’s, however, then they should reflect his wordprint. To assume that Nephi had access to a King James Bible or that he was acquainted with nineteenth-century Arminian theology in the sixth century B.C. is beyond the bounds of competent scholarship. Yet this is precisely what must be assumed if the wordprint is to be taken seriously. Even given this criticism, however, the results of the wordprint study must be explained. Perhaps the wordprint analysis tells us more about computers than about the Book of Mormon.

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*Book of Mormon Authorship* has made a prima facie case for the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon. It fails, however, to respond to scholarly criticism in some crucial areas. For example, since Welch first published his study on chiasmus in 1969, it has been discovered that chiasmus also appears in the *Doctrine and Covenants* (see, for example, 88:34-38; 93:18-38; 132:19-26, 29-36), the *Pearl of Great Price* (Book of Abraham 3:16-19; 22-28), and other isolated nineteenth-century works. Thus, Welch’s major premise that chiasmus is exclusively an ancient literary device is false. Indeed, the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon may be evidence of Joseph Smith’s own literary style and genius. Perhaps Welch could have strengthened his premise by demonstrating that the parallel members in the Book of Mormon consist of Semitic word pairs, the basis of ancient Hebrew poetry. Without such a demonstration, both Welch’s and Reynold’s arguments from chiasmus are weak. (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 16, no. 4, Winter, 1983, pp. 141-143)

Since chiasmus occurs in many languages its use in the Book of Mormon does not prove either its Semitic origin or that it is a style peculiar to inspired ancient scripture. In fact, many nursery rhymes have this same type of structure (e.g. Hickory Dickory Dock).

Interestingly, even the followers of James J. Strang, rival to Brigham Young and Sidney Rigdon for leadership of the LDS movement, argue for Chiastic structure in Strang’s book of scripture. Here are examples from the Strangite web site:

Here is beginner’s example of chiasmus from the *Book of the Law of the Lord*, chapter 39, section 1, which shows good rhythm. Notice that line A parallels line A’, and line B parallels line B’:

A YE SHALL not CLOTHE YOURSELVES  
    B AFTER THE MANNER of the follies of other men;  
    B’ but AFTER THE MANNER that is seemly and convenient,  
A’ SHALL YE CLOTHE YOURSELVES.

Here is a more complex example from the FIRST CHAPTER of the 1851 *Book of the Law of the Lord*, with God skillfully placed in the center of the structure:

A Thou shalt not TAKE the NAME of the Lord thy God in VAIN:  
    B thou shalt not USURP dominion  
        C as a RULER; for the NAME of the Lord thy God  
            D is great and glorious ABOVE ALL OTHER NAMES:  
                E he is ABOVE ALL,  
                    F and is the ONLY TRUE God;  
                    F’ the ONLY JUST and upright King  
                E’ OVER ALL:  
            D’ he ALONE hath the RIGHT  
        C’ to RULE; and in his NAME, only he to whom he granteth it:  
    B’ whosoever is not chosen of him, the same is a USURPER, and unholy:  
A’ the Lord will not hold him guiltless, for he TAKETH his NAME in VAIN.

(<http://www.strangite.org/Chiasmus.htm>)

Chiastic structures in Joseph Smith's writings do not prove them authentic any more than those in James Strang's book prove his writings to be inspired. As one person pointed out on the Recovery From Mormonism Board, "The chiasmus 'evidence' is like trying to prove from a piece of music that its composer must have studied music theory. And yet there are tons of music, fulfilling the basics of music theory, produced by people who couldn't even read and had no formal training whatsoever."

Further comments on chiasmus can be found in our *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* pp. 96G-96I; *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 17, no. 4, Winter 1984, "Ancient Chiasmus Studied," by Prof. John Kselman, pp. 146-148; *Dialogue*, vol. 26, no. 3, Fall 1993, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," by Brent Metcalfe, pp. 162-171. Also, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. by Brent Metcalfe, Signature Books, SLC, 1993, ch. 9, "A Record in the Language of My Father: Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon," by Ed. Ashment, pp. 329-394.

Also see: *Salt Lake City Messenger*, no. 113, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon?"

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