

Pattern in Scripture: The Visual Scriptures

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It was eight years ago last month when I discovered the inverted parallel arrangement of “redemption” and “resurrection” in DC 88:14-16, with a nice point of emphasis in between. Having read Welch’s writings on chiasmus (John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon”, BYU Studies, pp. 69-84, Autumn 1969; John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon”, Book of Mormon Authorship, Edited by Noel B. Reynolds, Bookcraft, Inc., Salt Lake City, 1982, p 33-52; John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon”, John W. Welch, Ed., Chiasmus in Antiquity, Gerstenberg Verlag, Hildesheim, 1981, pp 198-210), and even finding a couple of small ones in the BoM, I was totally unprepared to find this supposedly ancient literary pattern in a modern document. Surely it must be a chance occurrence. However, it quickly became apparent that the Doctrine and Covenants was loaded with this type of parallelism.

I ended up reformatting the entire book, identifying over five hundred inverted parallel systems, a lesser number of direct parallel systems, and a few examples of climax and random parallel structures. Almost all of the text was structured one way or another. The book literally opened up before my eyes to a far greater depth than I had ever seen it before. Fascinating parallels were discovered that facilitated my understanding of what was written.

Of course, it turned out that others had been there before. Richard Shipp and Charles Kroupa had published a little paper 16 years before (“From the Mind of God”, Shipp Bros. Publishing, Salt Lake City, 1972), and Shipp had written his MA thesis on the subject (“Conceptual Patterns of Repetition in the Doctrine and Covenants”, BYU, 1975). They presented chiasmic structure in several Sections. As is typical in patterns in the scriptures, their work and mine have strong similarities and some differences. The differences are sometimes as enlightening as the similarities.

There followed a three years “runner’s high” of discovery of structure in all four standard works, during which many insights and answers to old questions came. The end of it saw the Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price, about half of the Book of Mormon (the doctrinal discourses) and numerous excerpts from the Bible reformatted and held in fat looseleaf binders. The reformatted pages revealed the content in an unusually visual manner.

In searching for structure I have found it useful to print out the passage and then encircle with a red pen the words, phrases or ideas that are repeated, connecting the related material with a line. Often the structure becomes obvious, but sometimes it can take some effort to work it out. The passage can then be reformatted, with labels and indenting to show the parallelism.

There are four basic patterns in which each member of a set of ideas is repeated exactly once (except the point of emphasis may not be repeated): inverted (of which chiasmus is a subset) (ABCDDCBA or ABCDCBA), direct (ABCABC, ABCABCD, and rarely ABCDABC), climax (AABBCCD) (see 2 Peter 1:5-8), and random (no particular order in the repeated set) (see D&C 121:1-6). Inverted is most common, with direct not too far behind. Climax is much less frequent

and random is quite rare. Inverted systems tend to have a point of emphasis at the center. The other three forms often include an unrepeated point of emphasis.

Each of the elements of a given structure—single words, phrases, sentences, or larger blocks of text—can be thought of as packets of information. Paired elements are similar, opposite, or otherwise related. Sometimes an element helps explain or elaborate upon its partner. The structure gives the scriptures a sort of internal commentary that assists the student to understand their content.

In addition to these parallel patterns, there are numerous examples of lists of similar items. Often the number of members of these lists is consistent with the biblical number symbolism described by Bullinger (“Number in Scripture,” 1894, reprinted by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids MI, 1981).

Don Parry (“Poetic Parallels of the Book of Mormon”, Ensign, Oct. 1989; FARMS) describes nearly two dozen different poetic forms. Since I was interested more in understanding than poetry, I made no attempt to classify my findings along the lines he shows.

From time to time I pondered the significance of the structure. Most of the more than twelve hundred inverted parallel systems I had found were simply interesting and beautiful, but don’t seem to carry significant insights. The answer seems to be that the scriptures are written in a structured way so we would know that patterns are to be expected. Then when we find a system that seems at first to violate the pattern, we should look more carefully at the asymmetry and imbalance and see if there are hidden parallels. It is in these examples of apparent broken symmetry where the real insights come. At the same time, one learns to not take a pattern as the sole source of an idea.

Scholer and Snodgrass, in their 1992 preface to the reprinting of Lund’s classic work, “Chiasmus in the New Testament” (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1992), put it this way, “Examples exist, of course, in which the identification of a chiasmus is merely interesting and does not contribute significantly to understanding... Other examples, however, radically alter the way texts are perceived. If the chiasmus is longer than four elements, the center of the structure is emphasized and the corresponding parallels provide commentary on each other.”

As a quick example of an insight derived from an inverted parallelism, see D&C 88:37 - “...there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space...”. The second half teaches that no exalted couple gets a null or figurative dominion.

Reformatting and printing the text to show the parallelism opens up the scriptures to view in a manner that is impossible in the traditional format. The thoughts and flow of ideas spring quickly to the eye. The reformatted pages might be thought of as the visual scriptures. An Institute student recently remarked, “When you print out the scriptures in chiastic form it makes them so easy to see.” We had just considered Ezekiel 37. Here is what it looks like. (Print it out and lay the pages end to end to get the full impact.)

- A The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, 2 And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. 3 And he said unto me,
- a Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest. 4
- b Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5 Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones;
- c Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: 6
- d And I will lay sinews upon you,
and will bring up flesh upon you,
and cover you with skin,
and put breath in you,
and ye shall live;
and ye shall know that I am the LORD. 7
- e So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. 8
- d And when I beheld, lo, the sinews
and the flesh came up upon them,
and the skin covered them above:
but there was no breath in them. 9
- c Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind,
Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain,
that they may live. 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them,
and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. 11
- b Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say,
Our bones are dried, and
our hope is lost:
we are cut off for our parts. 12
Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD;
- a Behold, O my people, I will open your graves,
and cause you to come up out of your graves,
and bring you into the land of Israel. 13
And ye shall know that I am the LORD,
when I have opened your graves, O my people,
and brought you up out of your graves, 14 And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live,
and I shall place you in your own land:
then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the
LORD. 15
- B a The word of the LORD came again unto me, saying, 16
- b Moreover, thou son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the
children of Israel his companions:
- c then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all
the house of Israel his companions: 17
- d And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine
hand. 18

- C And when the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not shew us what thou meanest by these? 19 Say unto them,
- B a Thus saith the Lord GOD;
- c Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows,
- b and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah,
- d and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand. 20 And the sticks whereon thou writest shall be in thine hand before their eyes. 21
- A And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD;
- a Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: 22
- b And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all: 23
- c Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwellingplaces, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God. 24
- d And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them. 25
- e And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt;
- e and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever:
- d and my servant David shall be their prince for ever. 26
- c Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. 27
- b My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 28
- a And the heathen shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for evermore.

The structure helps us see the symbols described in the first A and B, the people's question presaged in C, and the explanations of the symbols in the second B and A.

In the process of discovery, an interesting phenomenon emerges: different people often come up with different results. Some view this as an indication that the structure doesn't exist, and any semblance of such is in the eye of the beholder. While there certainly are examples where this is

so, it is too simplistic a view. There are many instances where two and perhaps more patterns exist simultaneously in the same text. More commonly, there are multiple levels of structure overlaying the text. Wringing out a fuller meaning of the scripture is aided by seeing these multiple patterns. Also, while it may be difficult to write in a meaningful chiasmic pattern, it must be much more difficult to write with overlaid and interpenetrating multiple patterns.

As an example, consider 2 Nephi 25:23-30. The single capital letters show how I saw it originally. Later, when Don Parry published his book (Donald W. Parry, "The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns," FARMS, (1992)), I added an alternative structure, similar to his, denoted by double capital letters. I like both versions, as each has its own flavor. Both of them emphasize Christ and his relationship to the law, but in different ways. We also see smaller structural units including inverted and direct parallel and lists of four and five items.

A For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren,
 B to believe in Christ,
 and to be reconciled to God;
 for we know that it is by grace that we are saved,
 after all we can do. 24
 AA And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ,
 C we keep the law of Moses,
 D and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ,
 BB E until the law shall be fulfilled. 25
 CC F For, for this end was the law given;
 DD₁ E wherefore the law hath become dead unto us,
 DD₂ D and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith;
 EE C yet we keep the law because of the commandments. 26 And
 FF B we talk of Christ,
 we rejoice in Christ,
 we preach of Christ,
 we prophesy of Christ, and
 we write according to our prophecies,
 EE A that our children may know
 B to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. 27
 C Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law;
 DD₁ C and they, by knowing the deadness of the law,
 DD₂ B may look forward unto that life which is in Christ,
 CC and know for what end the law was given.
 BB And after the law is fulfilled in Christ,
 AA that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away. 28

- A And now behold, my people, ye are a stiffnecked people; wherefore, I have spoken plainly unto you, that ye cannot misunderstand.
 And the words which I have spoken shall stand as a testimony against you; for they are sufficient to teach any man the right way;
- a for the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not;
- b for by denying him ye also deny the prophets and the law.²⁹
- a And now behold, I say unto you that the right way is to believe in Christ, and deny him not; and Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him, and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul; and if ye do this ye shall in nowise be cast out. ³⁰
- b And, inasmuch as it shall be expedient, ye must keep the performances and ordinances of God until the law shall be fulfilled which was given unto Moses.

Finally, consider D&C 10:1-34. This is a deep chiasm which reviews reasonably well by Welch's standards (John W. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying the Presence of Chiasmus", F.A.R.M.S., 1989).

While there may not be any earth-shattering insights in this system, it is interesting from the point of view of the origin of chiasmus in particular and patterns in scripture in general, especially with respect to the writings of Joseph Smith.

Joseph was 23 years old at the time. He had just lost the first 116 pages of translated text. His exposure to chiasmus would have been primarily in the Bible, although it undoubtedly was present in the lost material. There was very little published on patterns in scripture at the time, and the probability that he had read any of it is quite low. The first book on the subject was published ten years after his death (John Forbes, "The Symmetrical Structure of Scripture", T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1854).

So, did Joseph stumble upon chiasmus and say "Hey, man, that's cool, I think I'll write that way!"? If so, why is there so much variation in style of patterns within different parts of the Book of Mormon, and between the Book of Mormon in general, the D&C, and the various books of the Pearl of Great Price? (Some day someone should examine the pattern style differences. They just might reach the conclusion that there were different authors within and between these books.)

There is also the issue of the purpose of the patterns. To what extent are they intentional? There are examples where intent seems apparent, such as Alma 36, which Welch rates (with few if any dissenting votes) as one of the best examples of chiasmus anywhere. To what extent are they accidental? To what extent is the Lord the author? (Certainly his reported words in 3 Nephi 20:11-23:3 form the most complex and beautiful system I have found in all four Standard Works.) Some have suggested they are memory aids. This may be true in some cases, but the patterns

often are multi-level and intertwined, and it would be almost as difficult to keep these complex structures in mind as it would be to memorize the text. Even after finding and documenting on the order of 1200 inverted systems and lesser numbers of other patterns, I have a hard time seeing any of it on the standard page, even when I know it is there.

My bottom line is that the patterns are a revelatory aid to enhance the information content of the scriptures. No one before our age has been able to analyze them as well as we can. It took the advent of the computer and an abundance of cheap paper to enable us to reformat the scriptures on a massive scale to see the complexities and intricacies of the patterns. It is almost as if the patterns are there for our day.

There is also the factor of personal involvement. The process is much more important than the result. The insights result in finding, not just observing, the structure. By the time you have pondered over every word and phrase, and moved them around on the page this way and that, a certain familiarity is born. It is interesting for me to speculate as to whether the insights I have received would have come with as intense study but without discovering the patterns. I think not, for the patterns have answered questions that have puzzled me for literally decades.

If I published all my stuff it would not be all that useful. Seeing someone else's work is like watching spectator sports or TV or even hearing a really good sermon. Contrast that with being the one who made the crucial basket that won the game, or gave the sermon.

So get out your Strong's or Webster's 1828 dictionary, put aside all of the commentaries, and focus on the scriptures, petitioning the Lord to let his Spirit guide you. If your vision of the structure is unique to yourself, rejoice that you have received the insight it represents.

He that receiveth of God,
let him account it of God;
and let him rejoice
that he is accounted of God
worthy to receive.

DC 50:34

Here is how I see DC 10:1-34.

Now, behold, I say unto you, that because you delivered up those writings which you had power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them. 2 And you also lost your gift at the same time, and your mind became darkened. 3

A Nevertheless, it is now restored unto you again; therefore see that you are faithful and continue on unto the finishing of the remainder of the work of translation as you have begun. 4 Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided to enable you to translate; but be diligent unto the end. 5

B Pray always, that you may come off conqueror; yea, that you may conquer Satan, and that you may escape the hands of the servants of Satan that do uphold his work. 6

Behold, they have sought to destroy you;

yea, even the man in whom you have trusted has sought to destroy you. 7

And for this cause I said that he is a wicked man,

for he has sought to take away the things wherewith you have been entrusted;
and he has also sought to destroy your gift. 8

And because you have delivered the writings into his hands,
behold, wicked men have taken them from you. 9
Therefore, you have delivered them up, yea, that which was sacred,
unto wickedness. 10

C And, behold, Satan hath put it into their hearts
to alter the words
which you have caused to be written, or
which you have translated,
which have gone out of your hands. 11
And behold, I say unto you, that because they have altered the words, they read contrary from
that

which you translated
and caused to be written; 12
And, on this wise, the devil has sought to lay a cunning plan,
that he may destroy this work; 13

For he hath put into their hearts
to do this, that by lying they may say they have caught you in the words which you have
pretended to translate. 14

D Verily, I say unto you, that I will not suffer that Satan shall accomplish his evil design in this
thing.

E For behold, he has put it into their hearts
to get thee to tempt the Lord thy God, in asking to translate it over again.
And then, behold, they say and think in their hearts--
We will see if God has given him power to translate;
if so, he will also give him power again; 17
And if God giveth him power again,
or if he translates again, or, in other words, if he bringeth forth the same words,

F behold, we have the same with us, and we have altered them; 18 Therefore they
will not agree,

G₁ and we will say
that he has lied in his words, and
that he has no gift, and
that he has no power; 19
Therefore we will destroy him, and also the work;

G₂ and we will do this that we may not be ashamed in the end, and that we
may get glory of the world. 20

H Verily, verily, I say unto you, that Satan has great hold upon their
hearts;
he stirreth them up to iniquity against that which is good; 21
And their hearts are corrupt,
and full of wickedness and abominations;
and they love darkness rather than light,
because their deeds are evil; therefore they will not ask
of me.
Satan stirreth them up, that he may lead their souls to
destruction. 23
And thus he has laid a cunning plan, thinking to destroy the
work of God; but I will require this at their hands, and it shall

turn to their shame and condemnation in the day of judgment. 24

Yea, he stirreth up their hearts to anger against this work. 25

I Yea, he saith unto them: Deceive and lie in wait to catch, that ye may destroy; behold, this is no harm.

J And thus he flattereth them,

K and telleth them that it is no sin to lie that they may catch a man in a lie, that they may destroy him. 26

J And thus he flattereth them, and leadeth them along until he draggeth their souls down to hell;

I and thus he causeth them to catch themselves in their own snare. 27

H And thus he goeth up and down, to and fro in the earth, seeking to destroy the souls of men. 28

G₁ Verily, verily, I say unto you, wo be unto him that lieth to deceive because he supposeth that another lieth to deceive,

G₂ for such are not exempt from the justice of God. 29

F Now, behold, they have altered these words,

E because Satan saith unto them: He hath deceived you--and thus he flattereth them away to do iniquity, to get thee to tempt the Lord thy God. 30

D a Behold, I say unto you, that you shall not translate again those words which have gone forth out of your hands; 31

b For, behold, they shall not accomplish their evil designs in lying against those words.

C a For, behold, if you should bring forth the same words

b they will say that you have lied and that you have pretended to translate, but that you have contradicted yourself. 32

B And, behold, they will publish this, and Satan will harden the hearts of the people to stir them up to anger against you, that they will not believe my words. 33 Thus Satan thinketh to overpower your testimony in this generation, that the work may not come forth in this generation. 34

A But behold, here is wisdom, and because I show unto you wisdom, and give you commandments concerning these things, what you shall do, show it not unto the world until you have accomplished the work of translation.

What does the extensive patterning in scripture mean? Others have pointed out that chiasmus is not confined to the scriptures. In its simple form we find it in the advice of the old preacher to a younger one about how to preach: "You tell them what you are going to say, you tell them, and then you tell them what you said." One day it showed up on the cover of TV Guide, with respect to a special broadcast on the Viet Nam Memorial: "We touch the wall, and the wall touches us."

Chiasmus seems to carry a certain power that touches the soul, as does this one. We find it in Shakespeare and other literature. The inverted parallel form can be found in some music. However, nowhere do we find chiasmus and the other patterns at the density or level of complexity as in the scriptures. The scriptures dictated by Joseph Smith are certainly on a par with the Bible in this regard.

The level of complexity is not uniform throughout the scriptures. As noted above, the 3 Nephi material is the best I have seen. Isaiah ranks as #2 in complexity, followed closely by Nephi. Much of the D&C contains fairly simple though firm patterns, although Section 76 is on a par with Isaiah and Nephi. Moses and Abraham are quite good, but there is only a little in Joseph Smith-History.

After seeing hundreds of pages of reformatted scriptures, I find it impossible to believe that Joseph Smith, or any other mortal, could have come up with the intricate and detailed patterns. It is particularly difficult to suppose that anyone could *dictate* such structured language on the strength of his own intellect. Yet Joseph *dictated* almost all of the latter day scriptures. I can only come to the conclusion that the Lord is behind the structure of the scriptures, ancient and modern. The challenge of D&C 67:4-9 still stands!

- A And now I, the Lord,
B give unto you a testimony of
C the truth of these commandments which are lying before you. 5
D₁ Your eyes have been upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun.,
and his language
you have known,
and his imperfections
you have known;
D₂ and you have sought in your hearts knowledge that you might express beyond his
language; this you also know. 6
E Now, seek ye out of the Book of Commandments, even the least that is among them,
F and appoint him that is the most wise among you; 7
F Or, if there be any among you
E that shall make one like unto it,
then ye are justified in saying that ye do not know that they are true; 8
But if ye cannot make one like unto it,
D₁ ye are under condemnation
D₂ if ye do not bear record that they are true. 9
C For ye know that there is no unrighteousness in them,
B and that which is righteous cometh down from above,
A from the Father of lights.