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WAS CHIASMUS KNOWN TO ANCIENT AMERICAN WRITERS?

“I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm degree of a just God, for I know that he granted unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he allotteth unto men, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction.”

Alma 29:4

Editor’s Note: This year marks 50 years since the discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon on August 16, 1967. To celebrate this 50th anniversary, throughout July and August Book of Mormon Central will publish one KnoWhy each week that discusses chiasmus and its significance and value to understanding the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and other ancient literatures. Be sure to check out our other KnoWhys on chiasmus and the Chiasmus Resources website for more information.

THE KNOW

Many scholars have long recognized chiasmus as a characteristic literary feature of ancient Israelite and Near Eastern writing.¹ Since the Book of Mormon was predominately written on ancient American soil, however, the question may naturally arise: is there evidence that any ancient American authors knew about and used chiasmus? Several experts in pre-Columbian American poetics have concluded: yes, ancient American writers did use chiasmus in a variety of ways.²

Allen J. Christenson first discovered chiasmus in K’iche’ Maya texts in the 1980s.³ Christenson found chiasmus present in several colonial-era Maya documents, including some elaborate examples in the *Popol Vuh*,

which is “by far the most important K’iche’ document to have survived.”⁴ Other native Maya documents using chiasmus include *Título C’oyoi*, a native ritual drama called *Rabinal Achi*, and the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* (the K’iche’s biggest rivals).

However, not all colonial Mayan documents feature chiasmus and so Christenson compared those that did with those that did not. He noticed that writings which utilized chiasmus tended to be those written before 1580 by a member of the ruling lineage. These documents generally lacked Spanish or Christian influence, focused on pre-Columbian history or religion, and often explicitly claimed to be based on earlier written

sources.⁵ Hence, Christenson felt that “chiasmus is an indigenous literary form not employed by Colonial era Spanish writers,” and thus “may be useful in determining the relative antiquity of ancient writings composed by the K’iche’ Maya.”⁶

Since Christenson’s initial discovery of chiasmus in native Maya documents, several other scholars have found chiasms in Mayan writings. Kerry Hull and Danny Law have documented chiasms in the writings of Ch’orti’ and Ch’olti’ Maya, respectively.⁷ Nicholas Hopkins and Kathryn Josserand found “chiasmic structure” in folktales of the Chol Maya.⁸ Gretchen Whalen and Charles Hofling noted its presence in Yucatec Maya narratives and Mopan and Itzaj Maya storytelling, respectively.⁹ Jon McGee used chiasmus and parallelisms found in the ritual dramas of the Lacandon Maya to support their pre-Columbian origin.¹⁰

Chiasmus has also been found in definitively pre-Columbian texts. For example, Michela Craveri and Rogelio Valencia found chiasms in both the *Dresden Codex* and the *Madrid Codex*.¹¹ These codices are both dated to the late post-Classic period (ca. AD 1200–1500), although both are believed to be, at least in part, copies of older material from the Classic period (AD 300–900).¹²

Inscriptional texts from the Classic period also utilize chiasmus, such as the hieroglyphic stairs at Dos Pilas, an inscribed bone found at Tikal,¹³ and Stela D at Pusihla.¹⁴ At Yaxchilán, Josserand argued that the chiastic arrangement of Lintel 23 reveals the name of an otherwise unknown royal heir, who may have ruled during a key ten-year gap in Yaxchilán’s dynastic history.¹⁵

According to Michael Carrasco, chiasmus was also used in inscriptions at Palenque, including the use of “envelope chiasmus”—where the beginning and end of a text form a chiasm—to frame three different historical narratives.¹⁶ Hopkins and Josserand identified what is probably the most elaborate example of chiasmus among the Classic Mayan inscriptions: Quiriguá Stela C, featuring a 7-line chiasm with three parallel sets of triplets, instead of the usual couplet, in the middle.¹⁷

According to Kerry Hull, “The poetic and literary aspects of Maya hieroglyphic texts are just beginning to come into focus.” Thus there is still much to learn about the use of chiasmus and other poetic devices in ancient America. Nonetheless, current evidence supports “the

presence of a poetic tradition at least as far back as the Early Classic period.”¹⁸ Within that poetic tradition, Gretchen Whalen has stated that “chiasmus ... is the culmination of Maya literary style.”¹⁹

Examples of Chiasmus in the Popol Vuh

- A The face of **the earth has not yet appeared**.
 B Alone lies **the expanse of the sea**, along with the womb of all the sky.
 C There was **not yet anything** gathered together.
 D **All is at rest**. Nothing stirs.
 D **All is languid, at rest** in the sky.
 C There is **not yet anything** standing erect.
 B Only **the expanse of the water**, only the tranquil sea lies alone.
- A There is **not yet anything** that might exist.
 (Lines 119–132)
- A First the **earth**
 B was **created**,
 C the **mountains** and valleys.
 D The **waterways were divided**,
 E their **branches coursing**
 E **among mountains**.
 D Thus the **waters were divided**,
 C revealing the great **mountains**.
 B For thus was the **creation**
- A of the **earth**.
 (Lines 253–261)
- A When **they were multiplied**,
 B **there in the East**.
 C Truly these became the **names of the people**:
 D **Sovereign**,
 E **Ballplayer**,
 E **Masker**,
 D and **Sun Lord**.
 C These are the **titles of the people**.
 B It was **there in the East**,
 A that **they multiplied**.
 (Lines 5171–5180)

Yaxchilán Lintel 23

A On 10 Muluc 17 Uo was dedicated the doorway of the house of Lady Xok,

B the sibling of Lady Pakal Xok,

C the child of Great Lady Xibalba,

C the child of Lord Aj K'an Xok,

B the sibling of Lady Tajal Tun, Bakab,

A the mother of Aj Tzik, Lady Xok

Quiriguá Stela C

A 13.0.0.0.0, 4 Ahau 8 Cumku, the Creation Event took place.

B Three stones were set:

C a The Paddler Gods erected a stone,

b in the First Five Sky place;

c it was the Jaguar Throne Stone.

C a The Black Deity erected a stone,

b in the Large Town place;

c it was the Snake Throne Stone.

C a And then it came to pass that Itzamna

set a stone,

c the Water Throne Stone,

b in the Sky place.

B This was the First Three Stones

A 13 Baktuns were completed, under the supervision of the Six Sky Lord

A common feature of ancient American chiastic texts is “the presence of dialogue,” noting that often, “the dialogue was itself arranged as a chiasm.”²² Nephi, at least, appears to have utilized chiasmus to structure dialogues with his brothers.²³ Furthermore, revelatory dialogue, according to Terryl Givens, is one of the most significant features of the Book of Mormon text,²⁴ and it is highlighted by a chiastic pattern on at least one occasion: the overarching structure of 1 Nephi places his revelatory dialogue with the Spirit and an angel as “the fulcrum on which the entire, complexly organized account of 1 Nephi balances.”²⁵

A common feature of chiastic Maya writings “is their authorship by members of the indigenous ruling dynasty.”²⁶ Kerry Hull takes this to mean that “expert use of highly paralleled forms was a prerequisite of rulers’ speech.” Thus, Hull has argued, “It is undoubtedly on ritual and other formal speech occasions where the full flowering of parallel structures can be found among the Maya.”²⁷ This is consistent with Christenson’s findings that chiasmus was common in ritual dance dramas.²⁸

In this light, it is significant that King Benjamin’s speech, given on a formal, royal ceremonial occasion, is one of the most extensively chiastic and parallel-structured sections in all of the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 2–5).²⁹ Other examples of religious or political leaders speaking on formal or ceremonial occasions in the Book of Mormon, like both Alma 5 and 7, also feature a high use of chiasmus and other poetic parallelisms.³⁰

Particular chiastic styles are also found in both Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon. For example, 1 Nephi 11:1–3, when paired with 1 Nephi 14:29–30 forms an “envelope chiasm,” like those found at Palenque.³¹ In Mosiah 3:11–16 the overall chiastic structure is also framed by an envelope chiasm.³² Alma 29:1–7 features three sets of triplets at its center (Alma 29:4–5), as is similarly found at the chiastic center of Quiriguá Stela C.³³ Some Book of Mormon poetics also use identical key terms³⁴ as those found in Mayan inscriptions.³⁴

Overall, these recent findings show that uses of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon fit surprisingly well within ancient “America’s earliest known literary tradition.”³⁵

THE WHY

Using chiastic analysis as a tool has yielded several worthwhile results in the study of Maya literature. In terms of dating, the presence of chiasmus in colonial Maya manuscripts is commonly taken as evidence of a pre-Columbian background or origin of those texts. Since the Book of Mormon purports to be a religious document from pre-Columbian America, comparing how chiasmus is used by both Book of Mormon and Maya authors can be fruitful.

For instance, Christenson proposed that the “presence of chiasmus in highland Maya texts may suggest an oral tradition.”²⁰ In the Book of Mormon, Carl Cranney found that chiasmus and other forms of parallelism occur more frequently in the parts that were originally given orally.²¹

FURTHER READING

Robert F. Smith, “Assessing the Broad Impact of Jack Welch’s Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 69–71.

Allen J. Christenson, “Chiasmus in Mayan Texts,” *Ensign*, October 1988, online at lds.org.

Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus in Ancient Mesoamerica” (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1988).

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NOTES

1. See John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim, GER: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981; reprint Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999).

2. For investigations into various Mayan poetic techniques, including chiasmus, see Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco, eds., *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Maya Literature* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2012).

3. Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient Maya-Quiché,” *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 4, no. 2 (1988): 125–150. See, more recently, Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’ Maya,” in *Parallel Worlds*, 311–336. These findings were briefly reported to LDS audiences in Allen J. Christenson, “Chiasmus in Mesoamerican Texts,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 233–235; Allen J. Christenson, “Chiasmus in Mayan Texts,” *Ensign*, October 1988, online at lds.org. See also John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 445–448.

4. Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’,” 320. For more on the use of parallelism and chiasmus in the *Popol Vuh*, see Allen J. Christenson, trans. and ed., *Popol Vuh: The Mythic Sections—Tales of First Beginnings from the Ancient K’iche’ Maya* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 12–18, esp. 15–17; Allen J. Christenson, trans., *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 42–49, esp. 46–47. See also Luis Enrique Sam Colop, “Poetics in the *Popol Wuj*,” in *Parallel Worlds*, 283–309. Christenson has also provided translations of the *Popol Vuh* that display the text in its chiasmic and parallel forms. See Christenson, *Mythic Sections*, 137–271; Allen J. Christenson, trans., *Popol Vuh: Literal Poetic Version* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

5. For the most complete report of his findings, see Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus in Ancient Mesoamerica” (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1988). See also Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’,” 311–336.

6. Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche’,” 328, 311.

7. Kerry Michael Hull, *Verbal Art and Performance in Ch’olti’ and Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2003), esp. 175–178, 297–301; Danny Law, “Poetic Style in Colonial Ch’olti’ Mayan,” *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 23, no. 2 (2007): 142–168.

8. Nicholas A. Hopkins and J. Kathryn Josserand, "The Narrative Structure of Chol Folktales: One Thousand Years of Literary Tradition," in *Parallel Worlds*, 29. See also Lydia Rodríguez, "From Discourse to Thought: An Ethnopoetic Analysis of Chol Mayan Folktale," *Signs and Society* 4, no. 2 (2016): 295–296.
9. Gretchen Whalen, "The Power of the Paradigm: Continuity in Yucatec Maya Narrative," paper delivered at the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (April 17–19, 1997), 12; Charles Andrew Hofling, "A Comparison of Narrative Style in Mopan and Itzaj Mayan," in *Parallel Worlds*, 403, 409–410.
10. R. Jon McGee, "Palenque and Lacandon Maya Cosmology," *Texas Notes on Pre-Columbian Art, Writing, and Culture* 52 (March 1993): 1–8. Diane E. Wirth, *Parallels: Mesoamerican and Ancient Middle Eastern Traditions* (St. George, UT: Stonecliff Publishing, 2000), 190 cites a symposium presentation by McGee where he reportedly said that Lacandon chiasms generally average about 10 lines in length, though some are as long as 60–100 lines.
11. Michela Craveri and Rogelio Valencia, "The Voice of Writing: Orality Traces in the Maya Codices," in *Tradition and Innovation in Mesoamerican Cultural History: A Homage to Tatiana A. Proskouriakoff*, ed. Roberto Cantú and Aaron Sonnenschein (Munich, Ger: Lincom Europa, 2011), 100–103.
12. See Nikolai K. Grube, "Dresden Codex," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, 3 vols., ed. David Carrasco (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:337–339; Gebrielle Vail, "Madrid Codex," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, 2:143–146.
13. Hull, *Verbal Art*, 455–456, 480–481.
14. Hutch Kinsman, "Grammar in the Script: Literary and Visual Devices in Grammatical Constructions," *The Codex* 17, no. 3 (2009): 44.
15. J. Kathryn Josserand, "The Missing Heir at Yaxchilán: Literary Analysis of a Maya Historical Puzzle," *Latin American Antiquity* 18, no. 3 (2007): 295–313. On the ten-year gap and possible explanations for its existence (plus mention of another candidate ruler during this time), see Ruth J. Krochock, "Written Evidence," in Lynn Foster, *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 289–290; Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 127.
16. Michael D. Carrasco, "The History, Rhetoric, and Poetics of Three Palenque Narratives," in *Parallel Worlds*, 131, 139, 148, 151. See also J. Kathryn Josserand, "The Narrative Structure of Hieroglyphic Texts at Palenque," in *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, 1986, ed. Virginia M. Fields (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 27.
17. J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas A. Hopkins, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Workbook for a Short Course on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 2nd edition (Tallahassee, FL: Jaguar Tours, 2011), 18–21. See also Kinsman, "Grammar in the Script," 37–38; Robert F. Smith, "Assessing the Broad Impact of Jack Welch's Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 69–71.
18. Kerry M. Hull, "Poetic Tenacity: A Diachronic Study of Kennings in Mayan Languages," in *Parallel Worlds*, 73.
19. Whalen, "The Power of the Paradigm," 12. This claim is first made on p. 10: "Chiasmic ... form represents the most complete elaboration of Maya literary style."
20. Christenson, "Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K'iche'" 318. This is typical of parallelism in most cultures around the world.
21. Carl Cranny, "The Deliberate Use of Hebrew Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 140–165.
22. Christenson, "Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K'iche'" 332. As Christenson pointed out (pp. 312–313) this was also a common use of chiasmus in Greek and Latin literature.
23. See 1 Nephi 15:7–12, 24–25, 33–34; 16:1–3; 17:17–20, 46, 48–52 in Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 31–35, 39, 41–42.
24. Terryl L. Givens, "The Book of Mormon and Dialogic Revelation," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 16–27; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 209–239.
25. Givens, "The Book of Mormon and Dialogic Revelation," 21; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 222. Givens is drawing on the chiasmatic structure as laid out in John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 199–200.

26. Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche,” 333.
27. Hull, “Poetic Tenacity,” 74.
28. Christenson, “Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K’iche,” 329–331.
29. See John W. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 315–410. See also Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, 159–172.
30. See Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, 233–239, 240–243. Cranny, “The Deliberate Use of Hebrew Parallelisms,” 155 calculates 56.67% of Alma 5 and 66.67% of Alma 7 as “parallelized.”
31. See Neal Rappleye, “‘The Things Which my Father Saw’: The Chiastic Inclusio of 1 Nephi 11–14,” at *Studio et Quoque Fide: A Blog on Latter-day Saint Apologetics, Scholarship, and Commentary*, May 9, 2015, online at studioetquoque-fide.com. In biblical studies, envelope structures are referred to as *inclusio*.
32. See Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, 165–166 for the chiasmic structure of Mosiah 3:11–16. Another possible example where the chiasmic structure is framed by an “envelope chiasmus” is 2 Nephi 25:24–27. See Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” 202. However, Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, 112 structures this passage differently so that it does not feature an envelope chiasm. Also, Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd edition (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 2–7 argues that Alma 36:1–5, 26–30 forms an “envelope chiasm” although he does not use that term.
33. For the chiasmic structure of Alma 29 see Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, 298. Mosiah 3:1–3 (awake/awoke/awake) and Helaman 6:21–26 (brother/brother/brother) also feature triplets in the center, though they are simpler. See Parry, *Poetic Parallelism*, 164, 406–407.
34. See, for example, the couplet discussed in Kerry M. Hull, “War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title Liberty,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 114–117.
35. Michael D. Carrasco and Kerry M. Hull, “Introduction,” in *Parallel Worlds*, 1.