

# Chiasmus in the Book of Abraham

Chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, is “a two-part [literary] structure or system in which the second half is a mirror image of the first, [that is,] where the first term recurs last, and the last first.”<sup>1</sup> Most Latter-day Saints who know about chiasmus have probably heard about its presence in the Book of Mormon and the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Chiasmus, however, also appears in the Book of Abraham. For instance, the opening verses of the Book of Abraham contains a chiasm highlighting Abraham’s right to priesthood:

- A It was conferred upon *me*  
    B from the *fathers*;  
        C it came down from the *fathers*, from the *beginning of time*,  
            D yea, even from the *beginning*,  
            D' or before the *foundation of the earth*,  
        C' down to the *present time*, even the right of the firstborn, or the  
            first man, who is Adam, or first *father*,  
    B' through the *fathers*  
A' unto *me*. (Abr. 1:3, emphasis added)

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1. John W. Welch, “Introduction,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, Ger.: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 10.

2. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 198–210; John W. Welch, “The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 74–87, 99.

Another chiasm appears in Abraham 3 that emphasizes the “selection of . . . noble ones as rulers”<sup>3</sup> on earth:

- A Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized *before the world was*;  
 B and among all these there were many of the *noble and great ones*;  
 C And God saw these souls *that they were good*,  
 D and he *stood in the midst* of them,  
 E and he said: These I will make my rulers;  
 D' for he *stood among those* that were spirits,  
 C' and he saw *that they were good*;  
 B' and he said unto me: Abraham, *thou art one of them*;  
 A' thou wast chosen *before thou wast born*.  
 (Abr. 3:22–23, emphasis added)

What makes the presence of literary parallelism in the Book of Abraham significant besides being evidence for a “tight and deliberate literary structure”<sup>4</sup> of the text is that this type of literary device is “an unmistakable feature” of ancient Egyptian literature.<sup>5</sup> This includes chiasmus or inverted parallelism, which has been identified in Egyptian art and architecture<sup>6</sup> as well as in ancient Egyptian texts.<sup>7</sup> This is seen in texts from the time of Abraham such as the Stela of Sobk-Iry, which contains a hymn to the god Osiris and features these lines:<sup>8</sup>

3. Julie M. Smith, “A Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 8 (2014): 189.

4. Smith, “Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23,” 189.

5. Jacqueline E. Jay, *Orality and Literacy in the Demotic Tales*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 81 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2016), 91–96, quote at 93.

6. Christian E. Loeben, “Symmetrie, Diagonale und Chiasmus als Dekorprinzipien im Bildprogramm des Großen Tempels von Abu Simbel,” in *3. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung, Hamburg, 1.–5. Juni 1994: Systeme und Programme der ägyptischen Tempeldekoration*, ed. Dieter Kurth (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995), 143–62.

7. Jay, *Orality and Literacy in the Demotic Tales*, 29–30; Robert F. Smith, “Chiasmus in Ancient Egyptian and in the So-Called ‘Anthon Transcript,’” unpublished paper, in authors’ possession.

8. For translation and discussion of the chiastic structure of this passage, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 202–3.

- A “Whose awe Atum set [*km̄*] in the heart of men, gods, spirits, and dead,  
 B Whom rulership was *given* [*rdi*] in On;  
 C *Great* [*ʕ̄*] of presence in Djedu,  
 D *Lord* [*nb*] of fear in Two-Mounds;  
 E *Great* [*ʕ̄*] of terror in Rostau,  
 F *Lord* [*nb*] of awe in Hnes.  
 F’ *Lord* [*nb*] of power in Tenent,  
 E’ *Great* [*ʕ̄*] of love upon earth;  
 D’ *Lord* [*nb*] of fame in the palace,  
 C’ *Great* [*ʕ̄*] of glory in Abydos;  
 B’ Whom triumph was *given* [*rdi*] before the assembled Nine Gods,  
 A’ For whom slaughter was *made* [*km̄*] in Herwer’s great hall.”

Additional texts from Abraham’s time known today as the Story of Sinuhe and the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor both contain a macro-chiasm that structures the overall narrative as an inverted parallelism.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Story of Sinuhe<sup>10</sup>

- A Sinuhe’s Flight from Egypt  
 B Sinuhe’s Conversation with King Amunenshi  
 C Sinuhe’s Life and Adventures in Syria  
 B’ Sinuhe’s Correspondence with King Senwosret I  
 A’ Sinuhe’s Return to Egypt

9. See the comments on the “internal symmetry” of Sinuhe’s “tightly structured” narrative in Richard Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940–1640 BC* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11, 21–26; as well as the comment about the “internally cyclical forms” (that is, chiasmus) of these texts in John Baines, “Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990): 67.

10. Modified from Smith, “Chiasmus in Ancient Egyptian and in the So-Called ‘Anthon Transcript,’” 8.

The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor<sup>11</sup>

- A Framing Device: The *šmsw* and Leader
  - B Narrator's Departure
    - C Life on the Island
      - D Central Narrative of the Snake
        - C' Life on the Island
  - B' Narrator's Return
- A' Framing Device: The *šmsw* and Leader

Since Abraham was not writing Egyptian literature for an Egyptian audience, the significance of ancient Egyptian texts and the Book of Abraham sharing common literary features like chiasmus and parallelism is noteworthy but should not be overstated. It seems that since Abraham was probably writing to those of his Semitic culture,<sup>12</sup> the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Abraham demonstrates the prevalence of this literary feature in the ancient world generally, including Abraham's own culture, and can be viewed as a marker of the text's ancient origin. The presence of chiasmus in the Book of Abraham is therefore consistent with expectations that the text bears a high degree of historicity and reinforces both its overall credibility and literary quality.

### Further Reading

Smith, Julie M. "A Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23." *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 8 (2014): 187–90.

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11. See Baines, "Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor," 67.

12. Eric Jay Olson, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* 12, no. 6 (June 1982): 35–36.