

Critique of Alma 36 as an Extended Chiasm

Earl M. Wunderli

In 1967, John W. Welch, now a professor of law at Brigham Young University, discovered chiasmus in the Book of Mormon while on a mission in Germany. He wrote an article about it in 1969 and has been its foremost champion since then.¹ LDS scholars have acclaimed chiasmus as strong in-

EARL M. WUNDERLI, a native Utahn, has degrees in philosophy and law from the University of Utah. He returned to the state after retiring as Associate General Counsel of IBM in Connecticut in 1993. He has long made an avocation of studying the internal evidence in the Book of Mormon, serves on the Sunstone Board of Directors, has published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and has presented several papers at Sunstone symposia in Salt Lake City and Washington, D.C.

1. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1969): 69-84. Although Welch's scholarly efforts have not been limited to chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, he wrote his M.A. thesis, "A Study Relating Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon to Chiasmus in the Old Testament, Ugaritic Epics, Homer, and Selected Greek and Latin Authors" (Brigham Young University, 1970), on the topic and the following articles, among others: "Introduction" and "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, edited by John W. Welch (Hildesheim, Germany: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 9-16, 198-210; "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 33-52; "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1991), 114-31; and "What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mor-

ternal evidence for the Hebraic origin of the Book of Mormon.² Other scholars disagree.³ Few scholars have published critical analyses of Book of Mormon chiasms.⁴

Although Welch and others have found a number of extended chiasms in the Book of Mormon, including the entire books of First and Second Nephi and Mosiah,⁵ I will limit myself in this paper to a critique of Welch's Alma 36 chiasm. He calls it a "masterpiece of composition," one of his favorites, and "one of the best" from among hundreds he has evalu-

mon Prove?" in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 199-224.

2. See, for example, Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 53-74; Donald W. Parry, "Climactic Forms in the Book of Mormon," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 290-92; Davis Bitton, "B. H. Roberts and Book of Mormon Scholarship; Early Twentieth Century, Age of Transition," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 60-69; Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999); Robert A. Rees, "Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 83-112; Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 125, 133, 173, 222.

3. See, for example, John S. Kselman, "Ancient Chiasmus Studied," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 146-48; Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 153-84; Dan Vogel, "The Use and Abuse of Chiasmus in Book of Mormon Studies," Paper delivered at Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, August 2001; David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or, Joseph Smith in Isaiah," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 157-234; David P. Wright, "The Fallacies of Chiasmus: A Critique of Structures Proposed for the Covenant Collection (Exodus. 20:23-23:19)," in *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 10 (2004): 162-63 note 37.

4. Vogel, for example, "The Use and Abuse," examines in detail Parry's 1992 chiasms of 1 Nephi 1:20-2:1 and 1 Nephi 15:25.

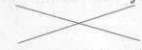
5. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1969); Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1981); Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline"; and Noel B.

ated.⁶ He has written about it at least four times.⁷ It reflects most of the problems with all of his extended chiasms. My argument is that he has imposed chiasmus on the Book of Mormon where none was intended.

What Is Chiasmus?

According to Welch, chiasmus is inverted parallelism. The term *chiasmus* derives from the Greek letter *chi* (χ) and from the Greek word *chiazlein* ("to mark with a χ "), because χ is descriptive of the chiasmic form.⁸ For example, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last" (1 Nephi 13:42//Matt. 20:16) is a chiasm⁹ because if written thus:

The *last* shall be *first*, and


 The *first* shall be *last*,

and a line is drawn between the *last*'s and another between the *first*'s, as shown, a χ is formed. There are many other simple chiasms in the Bible, such as:

For *my* thoughts are not *your* thoughts,
 Neither are *your* ways *my* ways, saith the Lord.

(Isa. 55:8)

This is a simple chiasm because it contains only two elements, *my* and *your*. Simple chiasms, which are most characteristic of those written in western languages such as Greek, Latin, and English, are distinguished from extended chiasms characteristic of Hebrew and other ancient languages, in which there can be any number of elements written in one order and then repeated in reverse order, e.g., a-b-c-d . . . x-x . . . d-c-b-a.¹⁰ For example, Psalm 3:7-8 is an extended chiasm with five paired elements:

Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," in *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 15-37.

6. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," 116.

7. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1969); "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1981); "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1982); and "A Masterpiece: Alma 36" (1991).

8. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1982), 35.

9. This particular chiasm is also found in Ether 13:12//Matthew 19:30, although the order is *first, last, last, first*.

10. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1982), 36.

Save me
 O my God,
 For thou has smitten
 All my enemies
 On the cheek-bone
 The teeth
 Of the wicked
 Thou has broken.
 To Yahweh
 The salvation.¹¹

Welch notes that chiasmus is a rhetorical device that has been used sporadically in poetry and prose for nearly three thousand years but doubts that Joseph Smith knew of it at the time he dictated the Book of Mormon.¹²

Analysis of Alma 36

Welch has constructed an impressive chiasm out of Alma 36. His rendering of it has changed each time he has written about it, and his latest (1991) version follows (verse numbers in parentheses):

- a My son give ear to my words (1)
- b *Keep the commandments* and ye shall *prosper in the land* (1)
- c Do as I have done (2)
- d *Remember the captivity* of our fathers (2)
- e They were in *bondage* (2)

11. Ibid., 36-37. The King James translation does not form a chiasm. It reads: "Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God: for thou hast smitten all mine enemies upon the cheek bone; thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly. Salvation *belongeth* unto the Lord: thy blessing is upon thy people." Welch explains, *ibid.*, 51-52 note 3, that many chiasms have not survived the King James translation but are clear in Hebrew.

12. John W. Welch, "How Much Was Known about Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon Was Translated?" *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 47-80, acknowledges that Joseph Smith could have known about chiasmus but insists that there is no direct evidence that Smith, in fact, did. He states: "Today, I acknowledge that people in Joseph Smith's environs [in] 1829 *could* have known of chiasmus, but I still doubt that Joseph Smith actually did." *Ibid.*, 75 note 107.

- f He surely did *deliver* them (2)
- g *Trust* in God (3)
- h Supported in *trials, troubles, and afflictions* (3)
- i Lifted up at the *last day* (3)
- j I *know* this not of myself but of *God* (4)
- k *Born* of God (5)
- l I sought to destroy the church (6-9)
- m My *limbs* were paralyzed (10)
- n Fear of being in the *presence* of God (14-15)
- o *Pains* of a damned soul (16)
- p *Harrowed up* by the memory of sins (17)
- q I remembered *Jesus Christ, a son of God* (17)
- q' I cried, *Jesus, son of God* (18)
- p' *Harrowed up* by the memory of sins no more (19)
- o' Joy as exceeding as was the *pain* (20)
- n' Long to be in the *presence* of God (22)
- m' My *limbs* received strength again (23)
- l' I labored to bring souls to repentance (24)
- k' *Born* of God (26)
- j' Therefore my *knowledge* is of *God* (26)
- h' Supported under *trials, troubles, and afflictions* (27)
- g' *Trust* in him (27)
- f' He will *deliver* me (27)
- i' and *raise me up* at the *last day* (28)
- e' As God brought our fathers out of *bondage* and *captivity* (28-29)
- d' Retain in *remembrance* their *captivity* (28-29)
- c' Know as I do know (30)
- b' *Keep the commandments* and ye shall *prosper* in the *land* (30)

a' This according to his *word* (30).¹³

There is much to challenge in this chiasm, including the unexplained asymmetry of element i'. One has only to highlight these thirty-four elements in Alma 36 to see how much text—more than 80 percent of it—Welch has ignored in constructing his chiasm. Alma 36 is full of repetitious language, and the language Welch selects for an element is often only one of two or more occurrences of the same term or phrase. Selected language and ignored language often work together to create false symmetry. Some paired elements are imbalanced in size, and some are creatively labeled to convey precision. Nearly all of the paired elements have these or other problems; the following nine are illustrative.

1. Elements a and a' pair "my son give ear to my *words*" (v. 1) with "this according to his *word*" (v. 30). As in verse 1, Alma also counsels his son to hear his *words* in verse 3: "And now, O my son Helaman . . . I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my *words*." Welch has selected *words* in verse 1 for the chiasm but ignored *words* in verse 3. Likewise, as in verse 30, Alma refers to the Lord's *word* in verse 26: "For because of the *word* which he has imparted unto me." Again, Welch has selected the Lord's *word* in verse 30 and ignored the Lord's *word* in verse 26.

Welch explains simply that elements a and a' "introduce and conclude the chapter by referring to Alma's 'words' and the 'word' of God."¹⁴ But if Alma's *words* in verse 1 and the Lord's *word* in verse 30 qualify as elements, it is not clear why Alma's *words* in verse 3 and the Lord's *word* in verse 26 do not also qualify as elements (not to mention the angel's *words* in verse 11), except that to pair them with each other would create asymmetry and thus Welch ignores them.

2. Welch pairs element e, "they were in *bondage*" (v. 2), with element e', "as God brought our fathers out of *bondage* and captivity" (vv. 28–29). Element e' exhibits not only the typical selectivity and ignored text, but also creative labeling and imbalance. Element e' is derived from verses 28 and 29:

Yea, and I will praise him forever, for *he has brought our fathers out of Egypt*, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by

13. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," 117.

14. *Ibid.*, 124.

his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of *bondage and captivity* from time to time. Yea, and *he has also brought our fathers out of* the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of *bondage and captivity*, from time to time even down to the present day.

In these verses, “he has brought our fathers out of” is used each time with a place, i.e., Egypt or Jerusalem, while “he has delivered them out of” is used each time with the condition of bondage and captivity, but Welch has combined one of two occurrences of “he has brought our fathers out of,” not with a place, but with one of two occurrences of the condition “bondage and captivity.” This creative combination makes the best match with *e* (“they were in *bondage*”) without repeating the key word in the adjacent *f* (“he will *deliver* me”). Element *e*’ does use *captivity*, which is used in the other adjacent element, *d*’ (“retain in *remembrance their captivity*”), but it can hardly be avoided because it is half of the phrase *bondage and captivity*. Thus, Welch has italicized *bondage* in *e*’ but not *captivity*.

Elements *e* and *e*’ are also imbalanced. *He has brought our fathers out of* (v. 28) . . . *bondage and captivity* (v. 29) comprise seventy-four words, which are paired with a single four-word clause (“they were in *bondage*”) in verse 2.

As with many other elements, Welch ignores much language in *e*’: Alma’s praising God; and God’s bringing Alma’s fathers out of Egypt, God’s swallowing up the Egyptians in the Red Sea, God’s leading Alma’s fathers into the promised land, and God’s bringing Alma’s fathers out of the land of Jerusalem.

3. In elements *f*, “he surely did *deliver* them” (v. 2), and *f*’, “he will *deliver* me” (v. 27), Welch uses only two of the six occurrences of *deliver* in Alma 36. In verse 2, *deliver* occurs twice; he uses the second one. *Deliver(ed)* occurs twice in verse 27 and once each in verses 28 and 29. Welch uses the second one in verse 27. The first one in verse 27 is out of order. The two occurrences in verses 28 and 29 each appear between the two phrases that Welch has selected to create element *e*’, “as God brought our fathers out of” and “bondage and captivity.” This would make element *f*’ somewhat asymmetrical, so Welch uses neither *delivered* in verses 28 and 29, even though they pair well with *f* because all four *delivers* in verses 2, 28, and 29 relate to Alma’s fathers, while the two *delivers* in verse 27 relate to Alma.

4. Welch pairs *I*, “I sought to destroy the church” (vv. 6–9), with *I*’, “I labored to bring souls to repentance” (v. 24), in the first of a series of paired elements that express contrasts. This is because *I* and *I*’ begin and

end the story of Alma's conversion. Alma's account of his conversion proceeds chiastically, from his rebellion against the church to his epiphany and his embrace of the church. In such a story, it is not difficult to find contrasting elements (e.g., rebellion against church versus embrace of church; physical effects versus relief from physical effects).

Element I comprises four verses, which begin and end with seeking to destroy the church of God. In between, much is ignored, which creates an imbalance in the two elements. The two occurrences of *seeking to destroy the church of God* and all the ignored language in between comprise ninety-seven words. Element I' contains twelve words.

5. The contrasting elements **m**, "my *limbs* were paralyzed" (v. 10), and **m'**, "my *limbs* received strength again" (v. 23), pair the only two uses of *limbs* in Alma 36 while ignoring language that does not work chiastically. Element **m** ignores Alma's falling to the earth in verse 10, which matches or contrasts with "we all fell to the earth" in verse 7, "I arose and stood up" in verse 8, "I fell to the earth" in verse 11, or "I stood upon my feet" in verse 23. Element **m** also ignores Alma's being unable to open his mouth for three days and nights, which are the same three days and nights in verse 16. And **m'** ignores Alma's being "born of God," which is used in **k** and **k'**. None of this matching or contrasting language works chiastically and Welch ignores it.

6. There is more ignored language between **m** and **n**—all of verses 11, 12, and 13—than between any other two elements. Elements **n**, "fear of being in the *presence of God*" (vv. 14–15), and **n'**, "long to be in the *presence of God*" (v. 22), are both creatively labeled.

Verse 14 reads in part: "the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did *rack* my soul with inexpressible horror." Welch reduces this clause to "fear of being in the presence of God" for **n** and avoids using *rack*, which occurs four other times in Alma 36 but all in the front part of Welch's chiasm with **n**: verses 12 ("I was *racked* with eternal torment" and "*racked* with all my sins"); 16 ("was I *racked*"); and 17 ("I was thus *racked* with torment"). None of these matches chiastically with *rack* in verse 14, and Welch ignores them all.

Presence of God occurs twice in verses 14 and 15 (**n**), but not at all in verse 22 (**n'**). Welch simply adds *presence of God* to **n'** and it becomes a literal match with **n**.

7. Welch pairs element **o**, "*pains* of a damned soul" (v. 16), with ele-

ment o', "joy as exceeding as was the *pain*" (v. 20). His key word is *pain(s)*. On the front side of his chiasm, *pains* appears twice, in verses 13 ("I was tormented with the pains of hell"), which he ignores as out of sequence; and 16 ("was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul"), which he selects. In the second half of his chiasm, *pain(s)* appears three times, in verses 19 ("I could remember my pains no more"), which he ignores as out of sequence; 20 ("joy as exceeding as was my pain"), which he selects; and 21 ("nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains"), which he ignores.

Welch's selection of the language in verse 20 is the worst match with o. Indeed, the language in any two of the other four verses is a better match than the language in verses 16 and 20 because *pains* is plural in all four rather than singular as in verse 20, and all four deal only with pains rather than contrasting pain with joy as in verse 20.

8. Element p, "*harrowed up by the memory of sins*" (v. 17), and element p', "*harrowed up by the memory of sins no more*" (v. 19), illustrate once again the selectivity behind Welch's chiasm. Between o ("*pains* of a damned soul") (v. 16) and p, the clause "I was thus racked with torment" is ignored; but read in combination with p, this part of verse 17 reads, "I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins." This language pairs better with other ignored language from verse 12 than with p' in verse 19. Verse 12 reads, "But I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins." Verses 12 and 17 thus have two phrases in common: "racked with torment" and "harrowed up with sins." In contrast, p in verse 17 and p' in verse 19 have only one clause in common: "harrowed up by memory of sins." Welch, however, ignores verse 12 as out of sequence.

9. Elements q, "I remembered *Jesus Christ, a son of God*" (v. 17), and q', "I cried, *Jesus, son of God*" (v. 18), are the turning point in Welch's chiasm. Welch notes that "the main idea of the [chiastic] passage is placed at the turning point."¹⁵ One problem is that Welch has changed his mind over time about what the turning point is—that is, what Alma's "main idea" is. In 1969, he had a one-line turning point:

15. *Ibid.*, 114. See also Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1982), 42. In Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon" (1969), 76, he states: "The thoughts which appear at the center must always be given special attention." Wright, "The Fallacies of Chiasmus," 145 note 5, points out that the first and last elements of a chiasm may be the most important.

Called upon Jesus Christ (v. 18);

in 1981, he added a matching element:

Alma remembers one Jesus Christ (17)

Alma calls upon Jesus Christ (18);

in 1982, he included the atonement, which became a one-line turning point:

Alma remembers one Jesus Christ (17)

Christ will atone for the sins of the world (17)

Alma calls upon Jesus Christ (18)

and in 1991, he returned essentially to his 1981 turning point:

I remembered *Jesus Christ, a son of God* (17)

I cried, *Jesus, son of God* (18).

If the turning point really is as important as Welch affirms, then it should, logically, be less difficult to identify.

A related problem is that Welch ignores some text between *q* and *q'*: “to atone for the sins of the world. Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart.” He explains: “At the absolute center stand the words ‘atone,’ ‘mind,’ and ‘heart,’ bordered by the name of Jesus Christ. The message is clear: Christ’s atonement and man’s responding sacrifice of a broken heart and willing mind are central to receiving forgiveness from God.”¹⁶ However, the omitted language says nothing about a “responding sacrifice” of a “broken heart and willing mind.” Furthermore, the consistent requirement throughout the Book of Mormon, as articulated by Lehi, Jesus, Mormon, and Moroni, is of a “broken heart and a contrite spirit” (2 Ne. 2:7, 4:32; 3 Ne. 9:20, 12:19; Morm. 2:14; Eth. 4:15; Moro. 6:2). This new formulation of a “broken heart and willing mind” is not Alma’s “clear message” (or “main idea”) but Welch’s invention.

In short, Alma 36 seems hardly to be a carefully crafted masterpiece by Alma but a creatively fashioned chiasm imposed on the text by Welch.

Efforts to Defend Alma 36 as a Chiasm

In his 1991 article on Alma 36 as a chiastic masterpiece, Welch does two additional things of interest here. First, he divides Alma 36 in its entirety into eleven paired units and labels them *A* through *K* to pair with *K'*

16. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” 127.

through A', thus creating a "full text" chiasm.¹⁷ Welch refers to the eleven paired units as *sections*. These sections are "panels of text filling in the gaps" between the "main girders of the structure," which are the seventeen paired *elements* in his Alma 36 chiasm, which I examined above.¹⁸

Second, Welch defends Alma 36 as an extended chiasm using fourteen of a set of fifteen criteria he proposed in 1989 for identifying and evaluating the presence of chiasmus.¹⁹ He republished these criteria in 1995 with slight modifications, using Alma 36 to exemplify nine of them.²⁰

The "full text" chiasm is, if anything, even weaker than Welch's "main girder" chiasm. It has an extra A section comprising the first twenty-eight words of verse 3 and appearing asymmetrically between D and E with no matching A' section. Welch does not explain this absence of a chiastic pairing, but by one of his fifteen criteria (length), "an extended chiasm is probably not much stronger than its weakest links."²¹

The extra A section is only one of many weaknesses. For example, under the criterion of "balance," Welch asserts that Alma 36 is balanced because "the first half of the structure contains 52.4% of the words, and the second half, 47.6%. Even minor words like 'behold' (six times in each half) and 'my' (eighteen times in the first half and seventeen in the second) occur equally in the two halves."²²

Welch's inclusion of minor words like *my* and *behold* is not only a stretch but invites a look at analogous words that challenge his chiasm's balance. *I*, for example, is analogous to *my* but is used thirty-five times (57.4%) in the first half and twenty-six times (42.6%) in the second half; and *yea* is analogous to *behold* but is used only four times in the first half and fifteen

17. *Ibid.*, 119–24.

18. *Ibid.*, 118.

19. Welch, *Criteria for Identifying the Presence of Chiasmus* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989).

20. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 1–14.

21. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," 6. He notes that there are degrees of chiasticity. If the researcher intends to use the analysis for a specific purpose other than to simply identify orderliness or balance in the text, "the analysis must be more rigorous. The bolder the implications to be drawn [e.g., the Hebraic origin of the Book of Mormon], the greater the support the analysis needs" (10).

22. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," 130.

times in the second half. Of more importance, however, Welch's eleven paired sections range in length from seven to 213 words. Section **E'** (sixty-six words) is twice as long as **E** (thirty-three words); **D'** (ninety-two words) is two and one-half times longer than **D** (thirty-six words); **B'** (fifty-eight words) is nearly three times longer than **B** (twenty-one words); and **H** (213 words) is more than four times longer than **H'** (forty-eight words). As "panels" between "main girders," the sections are so unbalanced, and the "main girders" are so unevenly spaced within the sections, that they fail not only Welch's "balance" test but his "aesthetics" test as well.

Welch's "purpose" criterion looks for "an identifiable literary reason why the author might have employed chiasmus," and his "boundaries" criterion specifies that a chiasm operates "across a literary unit as a whole" and does not "unnaturally [chop] sentences in half."²³ To examine this last point first, Welch divides sentences in half between sections **A** and **B**; **C** and **D**; the second **A** and **E**; **G** and **H**; **J** and **K**; **H'** and **G'**; **G'** and **F'**; **E'** and **D'**; and **D'** and **C'**. Some of these mid-sentence divisions may be a function of punctuation, and not all of them may be unnatural, but some of them are. **G'**, for example, ends, "For because of the word which he has imparted unto me, behold, many have been *born of God*"; and **F'** begins, "and have tasted as I have tasted . . ." This is clearly an unnatural mid-sentence division but was apparently done to keep *born of God* out of **F'**, where it would weaken the chiasm under another of Welch's criteria called "mavericks."²⁴ (*Born of God* does occur in **H'** as a maverick, however). This mid-sentence division keeps *born of God* in **G'** where there is another *born of God*, both to pair with a single *born of God* in **G**.²⁵

Regarding the purpose and boundaries of Alma 36 as a chiasm,

23. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," 5, 6.

24. *Ibid.*, 7. According to Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," 129, "A chiasm is less convincing if important words in the structure appear elsewhere in the text outside the suggested arrangement [e.g., mavericks]."

25. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," 128-29, explains away the weaknesses of Alma 36 as an extended chiasm by observing: "If an author uses chiasmus mechanically, it can produce rigid, stilted writing. . . . Alma, however, does not simply stick a list of ideas together in one order and then awkwardly and slavishly retrace his steps through that list in the opposite order. His work has the markings of a skillful, painstaking writer, one completely comfortable with using

Welch notes that “an understanding of chiasmus will also greatly enhance interpretation of Book of Mormon scriptures.”²⁶ In other words, recognizing a chiasm will help us to understand better what the writer is saying. But the imposition of a chiasm on chapter 36 may actually obscure the message, which suggests that no such chiasm was intended.

To Welch, Alma 36 is where “Alma tells his son Helaman about his dramatic conversion.”²⁷ But it seems strange, if this is what Alma 36 is about, that so much of Alma’s conversion experience is ignored in Welch’s “main girders” chiasm. Indeed, most of what is omitted from Welch’s “main girders” chiasm occurs in verses 6 through 19, which comprise Alma’s actual conversion experience.

What, then, is Alma’s real message? Alma 36 begins the first of three talks that Alma gives to his three sons, to Helaman in Alma 36–37, to Shiblon in Alma 38, and to Corianton in Alma 39–42. If we consider Alma 36 apart from Alma 37, we arguably lose what Alma was trying to accomplish in speaking to his son Helaman. Alma 36 seems to be about preparing Helaman to receive the sacred records that Alma turns over to him in Alma 37. The two chapters go together; indeed, they are a single chapter (XVII) in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. If Alma 36 should be read together with Alma 37, then by imposing a chiasm on Alma 36 alone, Welch creates a chiasm that does not operate “across a literary unit as a whole,” viz., Alma 36 and 37 together, contrary to his “boundaries” criterion, and he misses Alma’s main purpose, which was to prepare Helaman to receive the sacred things.

Nevertheless, two physics professors, W. Farrell Edwards and his son, Boyd F. Edwards, claim to have demonstrated statistically the intentionality of Alma 36 as an extended chiasm. They use the four of Welch’s fifteen criteria that can be “quantified numerically, namely: length (number of chiastic elements), density (the fraction of the passage that is devoted to chiastic elements), mavericks (the number of extra ap-

this difficult mode of expression well.” But Welch apparently wants it both ways. In his 1995 article, “Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus,” 7, he wrote that “tightness in the text is indicative of greater craftsmanship, rigor, focus, intention, and clarity.”

26. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon” (1982), 42.

27. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” 116. See also his “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon” (1982), 49.

pearances of chiasitic elements . . .), and reduplication (the extent of repetition of nonchiasitic elements).²⁸ They distill these four quantitative criteria into a single quantity *L*, which they use in their algorithm to calculate *P*, the chiasitic probability that a chiasm could have appeared by chance. Their algorithm “establishes with 99.98 percent certainty” that “the strongest chiasm in the Book of Mormon, Alma 36 . . . appeared in this book by design and rules out the hypothesis that it appeared by chance.”²⁹ Their “quantitative judgments regarding the intentionality of chiasmus,” however, “are based only on the order of words and ideas and disregard the overall integrity and literary merit of chiasms.” Thus, they recognize that their tools “may add to, but not replace, Welch’s nonquantitative criteria and other indices of chiasitic strength.”³⁰

For their analysis, Edwards and Edwards created two “full text” chiasms from Alma 36, both differing from Welch’s. (See their Appendix L.) One has ten paired sections, at least half of which are unbalanced, and the most unbalanced of which is *G* with 213 words and *G*’ with fifteen. Furthermore, there are two extra sections without matching sections, a second *E* between *F* and *G*, and a second *I* between *G* and *H*.

There is much more to challenge in their ten-section chiasm. For example, they pair *F*’ (120 words) with a much shorter *F* (twenty-one words), each reflecting the idea that “I (and others) were born of God.”³¹ *Born of God* occurs once in *F* and three times in *F*’, but Edwards and Edwards permit multiple occurrences of key words in a section by their Rule 4, which is one of “a set of strict selection rules” they followed to guide their construction of their chiasm.³² *F*’ is long because it begins with *born of God* in verse 23b, picks up *born of God* in verse 24, and ends with *born of God* in verse 26a, and thus there is no *born of God* maverick.

To avoid a *born of God* maverick, however, *F*’ begins in the middle of a sentence. *G*’ comprises the first fifteen words of the sentence: “But behold, my limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet,” and *F*’

28. Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?” in *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 103–30, esp. 107; retrieved in February 2005 from <http://byustudies.byu.edu/chiasmus>.

29. *Ibid.*, 123.

30. *Ibid.*, 111.

31. *Ibid.*, 122.

32. *Ibid.*, 112.

begins with the last thirteen words of the sentence: "and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God." To include the entire sentence in **G'** would create a maverick of *born of God* so it is forced into **F'** in the middle of a sentence.³³ Thus, their long section **F'** avoids a maverick.

The long section **F'** ignores the exceeding joy that Alma experiences in verses 24 and 25, which is also permitted by Rule 4 "as long as [such nonchiasitic elements] . . . do not appear outside this section."³⁴ Thus, Rule 4 permits any amount of extraneous language in a chiasitic section as long as it stays within the section. But Alma also experiences joy in verses 20 (expressed twice) and 21 outside **F'**, and it is not clear how, under Rule 4, Edwards and Edwards can ignore Alma's joy, which he expresses five times.

The long section **F'** also ignores the language, "I labored to bring souls to repentance," which is Welch's element **I'** in his "main girders" chiasm. Welch contrasts this language with "I sought to destroy the church," which occurs twice in his ninety-seven-word contrasting element **I**. Edwards and Edwards ignore this language, too, even though it occurs three times in their much longer, 213-word section **G**. They ignore it because by their Rule 2, the literary elements must share the same essential word or words, and Welch's "I labored to bring souls to repentance" and "I sought to destroy the church" do not share the same essential words. Thus, language that Welch includes in his "main girders" chiasm is ignored by Edwards and Edwards, which suggests some flexibility in constructing chiasms.

While this survey by no means exhausts the problems with the ten-section chiasm, Edwards and Edwards also developed an eight-section chiasm with the same imbalances between sections and many of the same problems but with one notable advantage: it eliminates the extra **E** and **I** of the ten-section chiasm. They did this by simply combining both **E**'s ("I received knowledge of God") with **F** ("I (and others) were born of God") into a single section **e** ("I (and others) received knowledge of God, and were born of God"); and both **I**'s ("I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins (no more)") with **H** ("I feared (longed) to be with God") into a sin-

33. It is not clear why this occurrence does not violate their Rule 1, which requires that "chiasitic boundaries . . . be located at the ends of sentences or significant phrases" to preclude "contrived boundaries . . . without regard to interruptions of grammatical structure." *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 113.

gle section g (“I feared (longed) to be with God and was harrowed up by the memory of my sins (no more)”).

The “full text” chiasms of both Welch and Edwards and Edwards simply swallow up ignored language in their large sections and avoid mavericks by including multiple chiastic elements in these sections, but their “full text” chiasms also reveal the amount of repetition in Alma 36, the flexibility in fashioning a chiastic structure, and the consequent uncertainty about just what it was that Alma supposedly crafted with such care.

Conclusion

The existence of extended chiasmus in the Book of Mormon seems far from proved by Alma 36. While the inverted parallelism developed by Welch is impressive on first reading, on closer analysis it is Welch’s creativity that is most notable. By following flexible rules, he has fashioned a chiasm by selecting elements from repetitious language, creatively labeling elements, ignoring text, pairing unbalanced elements, and even including asymmetrical elements. His efforts to defend it with a “full text” chiasm and fifteen criteria only highlight all the problems as well as his own creativity.

As for Edwards’s and Edwards’s analysis, they acknowledge that their “quantitative judgments” are based “only on the order of words and ideas” that they themselves select. They explicitly “disregard the overall integrity and literary merit” of the chiasm, which, as shown above, has little “chiastic strength” under Welch’s own criteria.³⁵

35. *Ibid.*, 111.