

Out of the Darkness:

The Chiastic Structure of Christ's Introduction in 3 Nephi 9:13-22

The Book of Mormon records that, after Jesus's death in Jerusalem, the Nephites and Lamanites suffered three days of darkness and destruction in the New World. A voice then penetrated the darkness and Jesus Christ introduced himself to the Nephite and Lamanite survivors. At this central moment, Christ spoke chiastically. By studying the structure of what he says, we can gain more insight into the depth of meaning in what he says.

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Out of the Darkness: The Chiastic Structure of Christ's Introduction in 3 Nephi 9:13-22¹

On Christ's death "there arose a great storm, such an one as never had been known" in all the Nephite and Lamanite land. There were "exceedingly sharp lightnings," "a great and terrible tempest" and "terrible thunder that shook the whole earth." Destruction was terrible in the land southward, and more terrible in the land northward. The face of the land was changed, highways broken up, cities sunk, burned and buried under mountains, inhabitants slain and carried away by whirlwinds, and rocks broken up (3 Nephi 8:6-18).

"All these great and terrible things were done in about the space of three hours—and then behold, there was darkness upon the face of the land." The darkness was so thick "that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness," so heavy that there could be no fire kindled, nor glimmer of light seen from sun, moon or stars (3 Nephi 8:19-22).

"And it came to pass that it did last for the space of three days that there was no light seen; and there was great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people continually; yea, great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them" (3 Nephi 8:23).

From the survivors' sufferings sprang a realization of their sins. Then a voice penetrated the darkness, and was "heard among all the inhabitants of the earth, upon all the face of this land..." The voice cried wo, and recounted to the people the destruction, city by city, declaring it was done "that the blood of the prophets and saints should not come up any more unto me against them" (3 Nephi 9:2-11). The voice spoke in the third person of the people destroyed, relating what happened to "the m" because of wickedness.

As the survivors' minds were turned to repentance, the voice left the topic of destruction, and spoke directly to those who were spared. Jesus Christ introduced himself as the speaker, and summarized in a few special statements his gospel and the relationship he seeks with those he loves.

These words are recorded in 3 Nephi 9:13-22. When read casually by a reader trained in modern stylistic conventions, these words seem to be not particularly well organized and somewhat repetitious. But when read with an eye to a chiastic structure,² the words are sublime. This

¹This is an extract from a much larger, unpublished article entitled "Alma's 400-Year Prophecy, Alma's Conversion Account and Mormon's 400-Year History: Shadows and Chiasmus." The larger article posits that Mormon's history of the last 400 years of the Nephite nation parallels the structure of Alma's conversion account in Alma 36. The account of Christ speaking out of the three-day darkness lies at the center of that larger structure, corresponding to Alma's calling to Christ and emerging from his own three days of darkness. The larger article can be found at <http://www.meikle.org/faith>.

² I assume the reader is familiar with chiastic structure. An excellent website on this topic is maintained by Jeff Lindsay at <http://www.jefflindsay.com/chiasmus.shtml>. John Welch has written a number of articles on this topic. See John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991) 114-131; John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969 Autumn) 69-

is a subtle and complex passage. How appropriate that Christ, introducing himself and his mission to his people, would choose his words so carefully:

- A** 13 O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and **repent of your sins**, and be converted, **that I may heal you?**
- B** 14 Yea, verily I say unto you, **if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life.**
- C** Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and **whosoever will come, him will I receive**; and blessed are those who come unto me.
- D** 15 Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name. 16 **I came unto my own**, and my own received me not. And the scriptures concerning **my coming** are fulfilled.
- E** 17 **And as many as have received me, to them have I given to become the sons of God**; and even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh,
- F** and **in me is the law of Moses fulfilled.**
- G** 18 **I am** the light and the life of the world.
- G'** **I am** Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.
- F'** 19 And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, **your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings.**
- 20 And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit.
- E'** **And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost**, even as the Lamanites, because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion, were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not.
- D'** 21 Behold, **I have come unto the world** to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin.
- C'** 22 Therefore, **whoso repenteth and cometh unto me** as a little child, **him will I receive**, for of such is the kingdom of God.
- B'** Behold, **for such [i.e. “whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child”] I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again;**
- A'** therefore **repent**, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, **and be saved.**

(3 Nephi 9:13-22)

84, reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982) 33-52. A number of other articles exploring chiasmus are available through the Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies, P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602, <http://farms.byu.edu>.

There is much understanding to be gained by studying the relationships between the key words in the correlating passages. A number of the correlations are sufficiently obvious as to give us confidence in the chiasmic structure. Other correlated phrases then take advantage of the structure to play on similar ideas, inviting us to ponder and gain new insights in the relationships between the phrases.

In phrase A, Christ urges the people to return to him, to *repent*, to be converted; in A', to *repent* and to “come unto me.” The word *repent* is an exact correlate, and the other words are closely related in meaning. All involve coming close to Christ. In each passage, a reward is promised. In Phrase A, the people are asked to return, repent and be converted “that I may *heal* you.” In phrase A', they are asked to repent and come to Christ “and be *saved*.”

In B, Christ repeats the plea to come to him, and adds another promise: “if ye will *come unto me* ye shall have *eternal life*.” In B', Christ states that for those who repent and *come unto him* as a little child³ “I have laid down my *life*, and have *taken it up again*.”

In C, Christ continues with the promises to us if we come unto him. “Whosoever will *come*, him will I *receive*.” In C', he repeats and expands on the meaning of coming unto him, and he repeats his promise: “Therefore, whoso repenteth and *cometh unto me as a little child*, him will I *receive*. . .”

The constants in each of these three levels are what Christ wants us to do—to come unto him, to repent. In each of the three levels he introduces a different blessing we shall receive by doing so: He will save and heal us; he will give us eternal life and has for us laid down his life and taken it up again; and he will receive us.

Christ weaves yet another thought into the correlating phrases in level C. At the end of the basic chiasmic phrase in C, Christ adds: “and blessed are those who come unto me.” At the end of the basic chiasmic phrase in C', he adds: “for of such is the kingdom of God.” Christ is foreshadowing one of his Beatitudes as he will eventually speak it to these people: “Yea, blessed are the poor in spirit who come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (3 Nephi 12:3).⁴

In phrases D and D' Christ shifts from his plea that we come unto him, and tells about his coming to us. After identifying himself as “Jesus Christ the Son of God” and testifying of his Godship and relationship to the Father (verse 15), Christ states, in D, “*I came unto my own*, and my own received me not. And the scriptures concerning *my coming* are fulfilled.” In D', he proclaims “*I have come unto the world* to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin.” Christ, God’s son, came to his own people to redeem and save them, and they did not receive him.

The phrases in E and E' take advantage of the strong chiasmic structure already built around them. Rather than repeating exact correlates to establish the chiasm, they use the structure

³ Christ refers to “such” people, meaning “whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child.”

⁴The reference to the poor in spirit is specifically foreshadowed at a more central point in Christ’s plea, where he refers to those who come unto him “with a broken heart and a contrite spirit.” See the discussion of phrases E and E’.

to invite us to ponder the relationships between the corresponding phrases.

Phrases E and E' share a similar internal structure. In each, Christ first identifies the recipients of his gift; then he states the gift he gives; third, he gives an example, preceded by “even so” or “even as” and focusing on the recipients' faith or belief; finally, he reminds us that this redemption comes through him:

E1 And as many as have **received me**,
E2 to them **have I given to become the sons of God**;
E3 and **even so will I** to as many as shall **believe on my name**,
E4 for **behold, by me redemption cometh**,

E'1 And whoso **cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit**,
E'2 him **will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost**,
E'3 **even as** the Lamanites, because of their **faith in me** at the time of their conversion, were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not.
E'4 Behold, I have come unto the world **to bring redemption** unto the world, to save the world from sin.

Pondering the relationship between these correlate phrases yields insight. The correlation of E1 and E'1 suggests that to receive Christ we must come to him with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. The correlation of E2 and E'2 suggests that Christ gives us the blessing of becoming the sons of God by baptizing us with fire and with the Holy Ghost.⁵ Both E3 and E'3 make clear that the blessing is premised on faith. According to E3, Christ gives to become his sons (“even so will I”) to those who “believe on [his] name.” In E'3, the Lamanites were baptized with fire and the Holy Ghost “because of their faith in [Christ].” In E4, Jesus states why we must receive him to gain these blessings—because it is by him that redemption comes. In E'4, he gives more detail: He came to this world to bring us redemption, to save us from our sins.⁶

In F, Christ makes the simple statement “in me is the law of Moses fulfilled.” In F', he amplifies. First he explains what this means practically: blood sacrifices and burnt offerings are to be done away. Then, he explains the offering that is to replace the Mosaic sacrifices: “For ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit.”

And at G and G', at the center, is that which is central: I Am. Again, the chiasmic and the parallel structures of the phrases invite us to compare the relationship between them.

⁵Compare Romans 8:14: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.”

⁶This phrase labeled E'4 clearly parallels E4. However, it also fits in as level D' of the broader chiasmic structure. If Jesus did indeed intentionally structure his words with these patterns, I speculate that in the original language the word order of E'4 was reversed, with “redemption” preceding “I have come,” as follows: “Behold, to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin, I have come unto the world.” This would line up the phrase “I have come” with the broader chiasmic structure while still preserving the internal parallel references to redemption in the E level.

G1 I am
 G2 the light
 G3 and the life of the world.
G'1 I am
 G'2 Alpha
 G'3 and Omega,
 G'2 the beginning
 G'3 and the end.

The core is Christ, the “Great I AM” (D&C 38:1 and 39:1).

Years before and across the world, Christ had proclaimed himself unto Moses at the burning bush, by repeating his name:

And God said unto Moses,
I AM
 THAT
I AM. . . .

(Exodus 3:14). Christ proclaimed himself unto the Jews in Jerusalem with this same name: “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).⁷ And to Joseph Smith, Jesus proclaimed himself as “the Great I AM, even Jesus Christ” (D&C 39:1-5).

At this moment of introduction, of all the attributes by which Christ could identify himself to the Nephites and Lamanites, he chooses two: light and life. In its chiasmic pairing, “light” corresponds with “Alpha,” “the beginning”; and “life” corresponds with “Omega,” “the end.” Is there any significance to this? Later, after Christ appears to the people, he discusses it further:⁸

8 For behold, the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me.

9 Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life.

(3 Nephi 15:8-9). First comes the light, Christ’s law and example to us. If we look to that light, then in the end, comes the gift of life. The light is the beginning, and life the end.

Other passages resonate: Moses saw the Lord “in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2). The burning bush gave *light* and had *life*—for it was not consumed—and it was this that drew Moses to it: “And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned” (Exodus 3:3). He did, and from the burning bush the Lord identified himself as I AM.

⁷ See also John 7:25-32.

⁸ And does so in the context of talking about the law of Moses, as he does here.

In Jerusalem, Christ stated that he is the light of the world, and that by following him we shall have the “light of **life**” (John 8:12). Christ linked his being the light to his time in the world: “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). To Joseph Smith, Jesus described the “light of Christ” as that “which is the law by which all things are governed,” and “which giveth life to all things” (D&C 88:5-13).

Jesus Christ’s first greeting, out of the darkness of destruction, to the righteous survivors in America, is profound and joyful, full of depth and meaning and light. The structure of his greeting supports the message.