

Chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, is well-known to most students of Mormon studies; ((See John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1, 1969. See also John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, available at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/book/chiasmus-in-antiquity/>.) this note explores one instance of it in Abraham 3:22-23:

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, and he said:

E 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.

Historically, most Mormon scholars with an interest in chiasmus have focused on its apologetic value. I will leave that line of inquiry to those whose interests tend in that direction; my interests are in literary approaches to scripture. In this case, a literary analysis of this structure both heightens and clarifies the meaning of the passage.

[Page 188]The A and A' lines emphasize the timing of the passage; the topic here is what was happening in the pre-mortal realm. These lines also hint at a relationship between being “organized” and being “chosen;” this association deserves further consideration and may help elucidate what it means for spirits to be “organized,” especially since both are described with a passive voice. ((In NT studies, this is often considered to be a “divine passive,” meaning a passive voice used to avoid mentioning God as the subject out of respect for the name of God.))

The B and B' lines introduce the idea of the “noble and great ones” and place Abraham among their number. From a literary perspective, it is interesting that Abraham is apparently unaware of his position among the noble and great ones until near the end of the passage; perhaps the information was presented to Abraham in this manner to make clear that the emphasis should not be on himself but rather on all of the rulers.

The C and C' lines are very virtually identical, with references to God seeing that the souls are good. Both lines echo language from the creation accounts (God, seeing, good) and perhaps at least thematically extend the creation backwards into the pre-mortal realm. These lines might also shed a little light on what it means when the creation accounts describe the various stages of the creation as “good”; the implication in this passage is that they are organized and great.

The D and D' lines, also very similar to each other, are at first perplexing because their references to where God is standing seem rather mundane in comparison to the doctrinal richness of the rest of the passage. But when read on a symbolic level, they position God literally “in the midst” of the souls and affirm his association with them. In this structure, the “noble and great ones”—the “rulers”—are symbolically surrounded by God. This is reminiscent of how Matthew’s Gospel introduces [Page 189]Jesus as “Emmanuel,” which, as Matthew takes pains to inform us, means “God with us;” ((See Matthew 1:23.)) that gospel ends with Jesus promising that he will be with them always. ((See Matthew 28:20. The phrase is even more compelling in Greek, where the title “I AM” has the words “with you” inserted into the middle of it.)) The point in both Matthew and Abraham is that the righteous are in a sense surrounded by the divine presence.

The E line calls the careful reader's attention to the fact that the selection of these noble ones as rulers is the focal point of the passage. This is perhaps the most important result of an analysis of the chiastic structure because it makes clear that this passage is not primarily about Abraham (despite the references to him at the beginning and the end) but rather about the ruling role of all of the noble and great ones. Because the central line emphasizes God's action of "making," the creation themes mentioned previously are re-emphasized. The structure also comments on God's actions: God's "making" action is central and is surrounded first by standing in the midst of God's creations and then surrounded by God's seeing action. This seeing/standing/making structure posits God as active and involved in creation.

Further, note how the form coheres with the content: the tight and deliberate literary structure of the passage by itself emphasizes the idea of a plan and structure for life of earth. Finally, I note that Abraham 3:22-23 is one of the Scripture Mastery passages, and this otherwise difficult-to-memorize text becomes much easier to remember when the chiasmus is recognized.[Page 190]