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# LIMHI'S DISCOURSE: PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE IN TEACHING

*Loren Blake Spendlove*

**Abstract:** *The author introduces a syntactic technique known as “enallage”—an intentional substitution of one grammatical form for another. This technique can be used to create distance or proximity between the speaker, the audience, and the message. The author demonstrates how king Limhi skillfully used this technique to teach his people the consequences of sin and the power of deliverance through repentance.*

“Enallage,” derived from the Greek word meaning “interchange,” is an intentional substitution of one grammatical form for another, such as changing pronouns from the singular to the plural or vice versa. This intentional substitution can also involve different combinations of switching the form of personal address. For example, enallage can include switching from second-person to third-person address or other variations.

Scholarly articles have demonstrated the possible existence of enallage in the scriptures.<sup>1</sup> David Bokovoy skillfully illustrated how enallage has been used by authors in the Bible and the Book of Mormon to provide “a poetic articulation of

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin L. Barney, “Enallage in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1997): 113–47; Kevin L. Barney, “Further Light on Enallage,” *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, retrieved from <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=98&chapid=1044>.

a progression from distance to proximity.”<sup>2</sup> In his article, he demonstrated how Nephi used this technique to draw his audience into a feeling of proximity in his discourse about and with the Lord. Nephi first created a sense of distance by referring to the Lord in the third person:

*My God* hath been my support; *he* hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and *he* hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.  
 (2 Nephi 2:20; italics added in this and succeeding scriptural passages)

After talking *about* the Lord in the third person, Nephi shifted and began to talk directly to the Lord:

Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O *Lord*, I will praise *thee* forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in *thee*, my God, and the rock of my salvation. (2 Nephi 2:30)

The effect of this switch in person is to help personalize Nephi’s message of praise to the Lord. Nephi’s relationship with the Lord seems to become more intimate and personal to us, his intended audience.

A similar and even more dramatic effect was achieved by the prophet Nathan when speaking with King David about his dealings with Uriah and Bathsheba. Following the death of Uriah, Nathan, during an audience with David, told a story of “two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor” (2 Samuel 12:1). The rich man stole the poor man’s only lamb without justification or recompense. Upon hearing this story, “David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man,” and

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2 David E. Bokovoy, “From Distance to Proximity: A Poetic Function of Enallage in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 60–63.

David pronounced the dire punishment that awaited the rich man (2 Samuel 12:5).

At this point, Nathan personalized the message for David by declaring, “Thou art the man” (2 Samuel 12:7). The effect must have been truly dramatic as David saw himself in the role of the rich man, with Uriah as the poor man and Bathsheba as the lamb. Telling the story about the two men in the third person helped create the distance that David needed in order to gain the proper perspective. Changing to the second person drove the message home to David’s heart.

A similar example of this type of syntactic technique is found in chapter seven of Mosiah in the Book of Mormon. Limhi and his people were in bondage to the Lamanites in the land of Nephi. Prior to their escape to the land of Zarahemla, Limhi called his people together and addressed them. He began his discourse by speaking directly to his people and referring to them using either the second-person plural pronouns “ye” and “you” or the first-person plural “we”:

O *ye*, my people, lift up *your* heads and be comforted; for behold, the time is at hand, or is not far distant, when *we* shall no longer be in subjection to *our* enemies, notwithstanding our many strugglings, which have been in vain; yet I trust there remaineth an effectual struggle to be made. Therefore, lift up *your* heads, and rejoice, and put *your* trust in God. (Mosiah 7:18–19)

In verse 20, Limhi identified the cause of his people’s bondage:

And again, that same God has brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem, and has kept and preserved his people even until now; and behold, it is because of our iniquities and abominations that he has brought us into bondage. (Mosiah 7:20)

Limhi was very clear; our iniquities and abominations caused our bondage. In verses 22 through 24, Limhi lamented the effects that this bondage brought upon them:

And behold, we at this time do pay tribute to the king of the Lamanites, to the amount of one half of our corn, and our barley, and even all our grain of every kind, and one half of the increase of our flocks and our herds; and even one half of all we have or possess the king of the Lamanites doth exact of us, or our lives. And now, is not this grievous to be borne? And is not this, our affliction, great? Now behold, how great reason we have to mourn. Yea, I say unto you, great are the reasons which we have to mourn; for behold how many of our brethren have been slain, and their blood has been spilt in vain, and all because of iniquity.

(Mosiah 7:22–24)

Up to this point in his discourse, Limhi had been consistent in addressing his people in the first or second person. However, beginning with verse 25, he made a dramatic departure from this rhetorical pattern by switching to the third person. He stopped referring to his people as “ye” or “we” and began referring to them as “they”:

For if this people had not fallen into transgression the Lord would not have suffered that this great evil should come upon them. But behold, they would not hearken unto his words; but there arose contentions among them, even so much that they did shed blood among themselves. And a prophet of the Lord have they slain; yea, a chosen man of God, who told them of their wickedness and abominations, and prophesied of many things which are to come, yea, even the coming of Christ.

(Mosiah 7:25–26)

This shift to the third person helped create distance between Limhi's people and their actions. It allowed his people to view, perhaps a little more objectively, the severity of their crimes, including the murder of the prophet Abinadi. In verse 28, Limhi continued by saying:

And now, because he [Abinadi] said this, they did put him to death; and many more things did they do which brought down the wrath of God upon them. Therefore, who wondereth that they are in bondage, and that they are smitten with sore afflictions? (Mosiah 7:28)

It is striking that it is no longer "we" that are in bondage and afflicted, but "they" and "them." In verses 29 through 31, Limhi pronounced the woes that would come upon the Lord's people if "they" transgressed against God.

Similar to his dramatic shift to the third person beginning in verse 25, Limhi finished his discourse by reverting back to the second-person plural when referring to his people:

And now, behold, the promise of the Lord is fulfilled, and ye are smitten and afflicted. But if ye will turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind, if ye do this, he will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage. (Mosiah 7:32–33)

Just as shifting to the third person created distance between his people and their actions, Limhi's switch back to the second person in the final verses helped his people get a personal look at their dire situation and recognize a possible solution to their bondage. As was the case with Nathan's message to David, Limhi's use of this syntactic technique helped communicate his message of repentance and deliverance with even more power to the hearts of his people.

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