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The Literary Structure of Alma 16

Derek J. Squire

Abstract: *Alma 16 is an easily overlooked chapter in the Book of Mormon. It could be dismissed as a simple summary and “tidying up” of the narrative. It comes after two of the most dramatic scenes in the Book of Mormon, wherein women and children are burned to death in Ammonihah and Alma and Amulek are miraculously delivered from prison. It also directly precedes the account of the sons of Mosiah journeying to Lamanite lands to preach the gospel. However—as is the case with other chapters in the book of Alma that serve to summarize and conclude large sections of the text—Alma 16 is carefully developed, highly structured, and beautifully written. In this article, I will analyze the literary structure of Alma 16, which is composed of two major literary units. Both units are structured as chiasms in which the matching units share many strong links and parallels. These two chiasms also work together to engage the reader with striking parallels and dramatic contrasts. Alma 16, being the concluding chapter of Alma’s missionary efforts among the Nephites, reveals a particular splendor and distinction. The two main chiastic structures help with the exegesis of these verses by highlighting significant yet potentially underappreciated features.*

Alma 16 can be a somewhat inconspicuous chapter in the book of Alma. It stands on its own as an original chapter of the Book of Mormon (In the 1830 edition it was formatted as Alma 11), despite consisting of only twenty-one verses.¹ It comes after a vivid, heartbreaking,

1. When I use *original* in this article to describe chapters of the Book of Mormon, I refer to the chapters or sections as broken out and clearly delineated on the original and printer manuscripts of the Book of Mormon. For referencing in this article, I will use the Book of Mormon’s current chapters and verses. See

and emotional retelling of Alma and Amulek preaching in Ammonihah, the resultant casting-out and stoning of men who were believers, and the martyrdom by fire of women and children who believed (see Alma 14:8). Alma 16 also follows the dramatic healing and baptism of Zeezrom (see Alma 15), and directly precedes the beginning of the next major section in the book of Alma, composed of the preaching of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (Alma 17–29).

Mormon, as the editor, tends to carefully structure “summary chapters” in the book of Alma. For example, the structure of Alma 28 consists almost entirely of different types of parallelism. Also, two large chiasms provide the overarching structure of Alma 29.² Additionally (albeit outside of Alma’s own account but still within the book of Alma), Alma 63 also consists of a carefully crafted chiasm.

Alma 16 consists of two major literary units, both appearing to be structured chiastically.³ The first proposed chiasm spans verses 1–12 and highlights an important episode in which Alma inquires of the Lord and receives revelation resulting in the rescue of numerous Nephites who had been taken captive by the Lamanites. The second proposed chiasm is in verses 13–21, focusing on the theme of preaching the word of God. It has a somewhat unexpected center (v. 18), highlighting twelve sins against which the Nephite missionaries were preaching. A striking parallel can be drawn from this second chiasm and its center, being comparable to verses in chapter 7 of the Gospel of Mark which exhibit a similar theme, chiastic structure, and center.

These two chiasms in Alma 16 work together to underscore a stark contrast: on the one hand, the violent destruction of the wicked by physical conquest, the captivity of the Nephites, and their eventual deliverance from their enemies through reliance on and obedience to the prayers and revelation of the prophet; while on the other hand, a story of peace, spiritual growth, and construction (rather than

Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). I will use this source for all wording and grammar in the text, unless otherwise specified.

2. Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007): 298–99.

3. Donald Parry identifies a chiasm in Alma 16:1. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms*, 266. Sterling D. Allan and Ryan Chapman also propose multiple chiasms in Alma 16. See Allan & Chapman, “Alma 16 Chiasms,” *greaterthings.com*, last revised 24 May 1995, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111123080531/http://greaterthings.com/Parallels/BofM/Alma16-CHI.pdf>.

destruction) of the Church, with a focus on equality (versus servitude), and a list of principles which, if followed, would bring the power and protection of Christ into the people's lives and grant them victory over their true enemy—the devil.

In this article, I will:

- Provide a summary of the account narrated in Alma 16.
- Present the two proposed overarching chiasms—the first covering Alma 16:1–12, the second in Alma 16:13–21.
- Analyze the matching elements from each chiasm, assess their strengths and potential weaknesses, and explain why these structures may have been deliberately designed by Mormon.
- Summarize key findings and insights derived from the structural analysis of this chapter.
- Include an appendix detailing the literary analysis used to delimit the major units of this chapter.

Summary of Alma 16

First, Alma 16 serves as a literary bridge in Mormon's narrative. It is the concluding entry, relating Alma's missionary efforts among the Nephites (see Alma 4:15–20; chapters 5–15), before moving on to the sons of Mosiah's missionary efforts among the Lamanites (chapters 17–29).

Second, Alma 16:1–3, 9–11 records the fulfillment of the prophecies of Ammonihah's destruction (foretold in Alma 9:4, 12, 18, 24; 10:22–23). Alma 16 begins with the Lamanites coming to war against the people in the city of Ammonihah. They destroy the city and its inhabitants in the 11th year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. This puts a capstone on the episode of Alma and Amulek's preaching to the people of Ammonihah. As they had prophesied earlier, the people would be visited with utter destruction if they did not repent. This prophecy is quickly fulfilled.

There is a related episode wherein the Lamanites also slay Nephites around the borders of Noah and take others captive into the wilderness. The Nephites want to rescue their brethren. A man named Zoram is the Nephite captain at the time, and he and his two sons, Lehi and Aha, go to Alma because they know he has the spirit of prophecy. They hope to be instructed where to go in search of their brethren in the wilderness. Alma inquires of the Lord and learns where the Lamanites are headed, and where Zoram and his sons can

meet the Lamanites. Alma also declares that the Lord will deliver the captives unto Zoram and his armies. All goes according to plan, and miraculously “there was not one soul of them which had been lost that were taken captive” (Alma 16:8).

Third, Alma 16 sets the stage for the missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (which will begin in chapter 17); with specific mention of their teaching and preaching in Alma 16:13–21.

The Nephites then enjoy three years of continual peace. Alma and Amulek preach repentance to the people, and the establishment of the church becomes general throughout the land. The Lord pours out his Spirit and his blessings upon all the face of the land, in preparation for his coming. The closing statement in this chapter includes the triumphant assertion that the people “got the victory over the devil” (Alma 16:21).

Proposed Twenty-three Element Chiasm in Alma 16:1–12

The first twelve verses of Alma 16 form a twenty-three element chiasm which highlights Alma’s inquiring of the Lord on behalf of the Nephite armies, in order to rescue their brethren who had been taken captive by the Lamanites (with correspondences between matching elements depicted in italics here and in all chiastic structures in this paper):

- A** “*much peace in the land . . . for a certain number of years*” (v. 1)
- B** “*until the fifth day . . . a cry of war heard*” (v. 1)
- C** “the armies of *the Lamanites had come in*” (v. 2)
- D** “*slay the people*” (v. 2)
- E** “*destroy the city*” (v. 2)
- F** “*destroyed the people . . . in the city of Ammonihah*” (v. 3)
- G** “*taken others captive into the wilderness*” (v. 3)
- H** “*desirous to obtain those . . . carried away captive into the wilderness*” (v. 4)
- I** chief captain over *the armies of the Nephites* (v. 5)
- J** “*Zoram and his two sons . . . went unto [Alma]*” (v. 5)
- K** “*whither the Lord would that they should go into the wilderness in search of their brethren, who had been taken captive by the Lamanites*” (v. 5)
- L** “Alma inquired of the Lord” (v. 6)

- K'** "the Lamanites will cross the river
Sidon *in the south wilderness*
... *there* shall ye meet them ...
and *there the Lord* will deliver
unto thee *thy brethren which*
have been taken captive by the
Lamanites" (v. 6)
- J'** "Zoram and his sons crossed over
the river Sidon" (v. 7)
- I'** "*with their armies*" (v. 7)
- H'** "*into the wilderness ... they took their*
brethren which had been taken captive by
the Lamanites" (v. 8)
- G'** "not one soul of them had been lost that were
taken captive" (v. 8)
- F'** "*the people of Ammonihah were destroyed;*
yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was
destroyed" (v. 9)
- E'** "and also their *great city*, which they said God could
not *destroy* ... it was left desolate" (vv. 9–10)
- D'** "they were of *the profession of Nehor*, who were *slain*"
(v. 11)
- C'** "*the Lamanites did not come again*" (v. 12)
- B'** "*to war against the Nephites until the fourteenth year*" (v. 12)
- A'** "*thus for three years ... continual peace in all the land*" (v. 12)

Correlation Between Matching Elements

Correlations between the matching elements of the above chiasm are primarily direct verbal parallels. A certain elegance is manifest in this chiasm, in that there are multiple matching elements that appear in inverted order in the second occurrence, as well as a few instances of amplification/intensification in the second matching element:

- Element A mentions "peace in the land" and then "years."⁴ Element A' mentions these two parts in inverted order. An actual number of "years" is noted, and then element A's "much peace" is amplified to become "continual peace" in A'. Further amplification is demonstrated by the peace extended from "in the land of Zarahemla" in A to "in all the land" in A'.

4. To keep to a minimum the distractions caused by numerous citations, verse numbers will not be shown here. Verse numbers for this section can be found at the end of each element in the chiasm itself.

- Element B notes the “cry of war” heard in Nephite lands, whereas B’ notes that there was no more “war” at that time. Both elements include a timeframe along with the word *until*. The keyword *war* and a phrase beginning with the word *until* are in inverted order.
- Elements C and C’ both mention “the Lamanites.” In C, the Lamanites “had come in” upon the people in the city of Ammonihah. In contrast, in C’ the Lamanites “did not come again.”
- Element D refers to Lamanites slaying the people of Ammonihah, whereas D’ mentions these same people being slain, but by a different and more specific association: “for they were of the profession of Nehor, who were slain.” The two parts to these elements of a group of people and the word *slay/slain* are in inverted order in D’.
- The two parts of element E, “destroy” and “the city,” also appear in inverted order in E’. In E, the Lamanites “destroy the city.” In E’, this intensification illustrates the irony of reversal by adding “their great city, which they said God could not destroy.” Intensification is also present in E’ as “the city” is now “their great city,” and not only is the city destroyed, but it is also “left desolate” in just one day.
- The pattern of inversion recurs in elements F and F’. The two parts to each element, namely, “destroyed” and “the people of Ammonihah,” are in inverted order in element F’. In F, the Lamanites “destroyed the people . . . of Ammonihah.” In F’, “the people of Ammonihah were destroyed.” Additional intensification is exhibited by a second, emphatic phrase in F’: “Yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed.” A subtle yet significant shift is evident as the narrative moves from the use of the active voice in F to the use of the passive voice in F’. In F, the Lamanites act as agents in a military event in which “they had destroyed” the people in the city of Ammonihah. In F’, the passive voice is used: “The people of Ammonihah were destroyed; yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed.” The focus shifts from the Lamanites as the destroyers to the culpability of the people in Ammonihah for their own destruction. This grammatical shift aligns with verses 9–11, reinterpreting the event not as a random raid, but as the fulfillment of prophecy

and divine judgment (see Alma 9:14). This is another form of amplification in a sense. The first instance (F) is the raw fact of the invasion. The mirrored instance (F') is the prophetic, theological interpretation of that fact. The destruction is no longer just something the Lamanites *did*; it is something that *happened* to Ammonihah and its people as a direct consequence of their wickedness.

- Elements G and G' both mention the people that were "taken captive,"⁵ but in G' the reader learns from this unequivocal statement that "not one soul of them had been lost that were taken captive."
- Another inversion arises involving two parts in elements H and H', namely, the word *captive* and the phrase *into the wilderness*. In H, "the Nephites were desirous to obtain those . . . carried away captive into the wilderness." In H', the Nephites drove the Lamanites "into the wilderness; and they took their brethren which had been taken captive." The desire of the Nephites to rescue those who had been taken captive in element H is realized in element H'. Synonymous verbs are used to state this desire and realization, namely, "obtain" in H and "took" in H'.
- The "armies" of the Nephites are mentioned in elements I and I'.
- Elements J and J' share the phrase *Zoram and his sons* and describe their movements. In J, Zoram and his two sons "went unto [Alma]," into the central social/political location of the Nephites. In J', they "crossed over the river Sidon," out into the military frontier.
- Element K provides the reason Zoram asks Alma to inquire of the Lord—"to know whither the Lord would that they should go . . . in search of their brethren who had been taken captive by the Lamanites." In K', Alma receives an answer from the Lord which he then shares with Zoram and his sons about where they should go. The word *there* is used twice in Alma's answer to first tell them where they will meet up with

5. In *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, verse 3 states, "they had destroyed the people . . . and also some around the borders of Noah, and taking others captive into the wilderness." To keep the verb forms consistent in this sentence, I have used the word *taken* instead of the word *taking* to match "had destroyed."

the Lamanites, and second, to let them know the Lord would deliver their brethren unto them in that same place. These elements share the phrase “*brethren who had/have been taken captive by the Lamanites.*” The only two uses of “the Lord” (outside of its appearance in the central element, L) are found in these two elements.

- Element L, the central element of this chiasm, is striking in its simplicity, but very fitting to serve as the central focus and turning point of the chiasm. It succinctly states, “Alma inquired of the Lord concerning the matter.” The act of inquiring of the Lord is of such profound importance to the narrative that no further elaboration is necessary. The fate of the captive Nephites hinges on this faithful act by Alma and the subsequent revelation he receives from the Lord.

Analyzing the Strength of the Proposed Chiasm

Multiple points of evidence indicate a higher likelihood that this chiasm was deliberately designed by Mormon. First, having such an abundance of matching elements within the chiasm strengthens the validity of the structure as intentional. The eleven matching elements also appear precisely in inverted order in their second occurrences. Second, there are multiple key words and phrases that are found in paired elements and nowhere else within the chiasm. Such examples include the key word *peace*, found only in elements A and A', and the phrase *Zoram and his sons* in elements I and I'. Third, many inversions of key words and phrases have also been identified within the paired elements themselves. Such inversions occur in elements A and A', D and D', E and E', F and F', and H and H'. Fourth, the literary technique of amplification (or intensification) is used effectively between multiple paired elements in this structure. Amplification is employed in elements A and A', E and E', F and F', and G and G'. Finally, the chiasm's central element, L, functions as an effective turning point, or hinge point, in the narrative.

Verses 9–11 deserve further explanation. Parts of verses 10 and 11 are not included in the above chiastic structure. Some of the people's words to Alma in Alma 9:4 are realized in Alma 16:9–10. The people of Ammonihah initially proclaim, “We will not believe thy words if thou shouldst prophesy that this great city should be destroyed in one day” (Alma 9:4). Two main interpretive possibilities can be deduced from this verse, with the second one coming with some added nuance:

First, Alma initially shares this prophecy with the people of Ammonihah who then repeat it back to him. Second, the people unwittingly utter this "prophecy" themselves somewhat akin to Caiaphas' prophecy he unintentionally gives in John 11:49–52. This could be labeled a prophecy or be treated simply as a declaration or statement. Part of this prophecy's (or statement's) fulfillment, "But behold, in one day it was left desolate . . ." (16:10), is included in the above chiasm in element E' because it stresses the devastation experienced in Ammonihah. However, the rest of verse 10 and most of verse 11, detailing the dead bodies and the scent upon the land, could also be included in this element, performing this same function of intensifying the account of the destruction.

Analysis of Alma 16:13–21

The second literary unit in Alma 16 consists of verses 13–21. The proposed five-element chiasm for these verses is presented below. A supplemental structure is also shared, drawing out some of the key words and phrases from these verses, which are repeated in inverted order. This second structure provides the framework for the overall structure. To be clear, this second structure does not compete with the principal five-element chiasm, but rather complements it and highlights some of its strengths. It also strengthens the argument for deliberate design of the five-element chiasm. Additional parallels and correspondences rich with meaning are only found in the five-element chiasm, as discussed below.

Proposed Five-Element Chiasm in Alma 16:13–21

The final nine verses of Alma 16 (vv. 13–21) consist of five sub-units which are delimited in the appendix. These sub-units form a five-element chiasm highlighting the establishment of the church throughout all Nephite lands:

- A** Alma and Amulek *preach the word throughout all the land; establishment of the church becomes general throughout the land* (vv. 13–15)
- B** The Lord pours out his Spirit on all the land to prepare hearts and minds to receive the word to be *taught* at the time of *Christ's coming*; they are to receive the word with *joy* (vv. 16–17)
- C** Priests preach against twelve specific sins (v. 18)
- B'** Holding forth *the coming of the Son of God*; the people inquire

concerning the place he would come and are *taught* that He would appear unto them after his resurrection; *great joy and gladness* (vv. 19–20)

A' *The church is established throughout all the land; the word of God is preached in all the land; the Lord pours out his blessings upon the people* (v. 21)

Correlation Between Matching Elements of the Five-Element Chiasm

Correlations between the matching elements of the five-element chiasm consist largely of direct verbal parallels.

- The chiasm is framed in elements A and A' by two key phrases. Element A includes the phrases *preach the word* and *the establishment of the church became general throughout the land* (v. 15). Element A' has these two phrases in inverted order—the phrase *the church had been established throughout all the land* is followed by the phrase *the word of God being preached* (v. 21). Not only are these two key phrases in inverted order in element A', but also both phrases can be further broken down to exhibit additional inversion. In element A, the ordering of the first phrase is “preach . . . word,” whereas in A' the ordering is “word . . . preached.” In element A, the ordering of the second phrase is “establishment . . . church,” whereas in A' the ordering is “church . . . established.” In element A', the description of the establishment of the church is elevated by the addition of the word *all* in the phrase *throughout all the land* (v. 21) compared with the phrase *throughout the land* (v. 15) in A.
- Elements B and B' both mention Christ's coming (vv. 16, 19, 20) and the people being “taught” (vv. 16, 20). The Lord pours out his Spirit on all the face of the land in verse 16. This coming of the Spirit also parallels the coming of the Son of God in verses 19 and 20. The idea of receiving the word with joy appears in verses 17 and 20. In B, the Lord's Spirit works to prepare the people's hearts to “receive the word with joy” (v. 17). In B', the people receive teachings about the Son of God (the Word) “with great joy and gladness” (v. 20). This second reaction is another example of intensification as “joy” in B is set in parallel with “great joy and gladness” in B'. Alma, in Alma 33:22–23, defines the word as follows: “Begin

to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection. . . . And now my brethren . . . plant *this word* in your hearts" (emphasis added). Significant parts of Alma's definition of the word are found in Alma 16:19 in element B', including the following (each with its corresponding phrase from Alma 33): "the coming of the Son of God" / "the Son of God, that he will come;" "his sufferings and death" / "he shall suffer and die;" and "and also the resurrection of the dead" / "he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection." The prominence of "the word," referenced three times in element B, thus does not disappear in B' but rather is given enhanced definition and greater emphasis.

- The central element C includes a list of twelve sins or sins against which the priests preach. This is a fairly surprising center. The coming of the Son of God, his sufferings, and death in verse 19 would typically be a more likely candidate to serve as the central element of a chiasm. Instead, the coming of the Son of God and receiving the word (referenced in verses 16, 17, and 19) function as a distinct frame for the list of sins in verse 18. For the people to be spiritually prepared for the coming of the Son of God, they must guard against certain sins. This focus on the actions the people could undertake to prepare for the coming of the Son of God is thus central to this unit. As people refrain from such sins and look forward to the coming of the Son of God, the church is established throughout all the land and victory over the devil is declared. This is a direct result of preaching, a theme prevalent throughout this unit. This list also complements the theme of completeness and totality that permeates the entire literary unit. The priests "did preach against *all* lyings . . . and *all* manner of lasciviousness" (v. 18, emphasis added). (This theme is explored further in the appendix.)

The word *preach*, or any of its derivatives, is found in the first, central, and last elements in the chiasm, and nowhere else within it. This complies with Nils Lund's third "law" of chiastic structures, which states: "Identical ideas are often distributed in such a fashion that they

occur in the extremes and at the center of their respective system, and nowhere else in the system.”⁶

Supplemental Twelve-Element Chiastic Structure in Alma 16:13–21

This supplemental chiastic structure is provided here for reference purposes, but will not be examined in detail until the section titled “Analyzing the Strength of the Proposed Chiasm” below. Keywords and phrases from these verses are arranged chiastically, complementing the five-element chiasm introduced above. This chiastic structure is provided below:

- A “*preach the word throughout all the land*” (v. 15)
- B “*the establishment of the church became general throughout the land*” (v. 15)
- C “*the word . . . taught among them*” (v. 16)
- D “*at the time of his coming*” (v. 16)
- E “*preach against*” (v. 18)
 - F “*lyings, deceivings, envyings, strifes, malice, and revilings*” (v. 18)
 - F’ “*stealing, robbing, plundering, murdering, committing adultery, and all manner of lasciviousness*” (v. 18)
- E’ “*crying that these things ought not so to be*” (v. 18)
- D’ “*the coming of the Son of God*” (v. 19)
- C’ “*they were taught*” (v. 20)
- B’ “*the church had been established throughout all the land*” (v. 21)
- A’ “*The word of God being preached . . . in all the land*” (v. 21)

Parallels Between Alma 16:18 and Mark 7:20–23

An intriguing correlation exists between Alma 16:18 and a passage in Mark 7:20–23. However, before diving into this further, to be clear, no proposition is being made as to whether the passage in Mark was used in translating this verse in the Book of Mormon; there may even be an unknown common source that predates both passages. However, the comparison of Alma 16:18 with Mark 7:20–23 provides additional insights that may factor into the structure of the chiasm in Alma 16.

Mark 7:20–23 also includes a list of twelve sins which are a part

6. Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942): 40–41.

of a larger chiasmic structure. Having the same total number of sins listed appears to be a significant correlation with Alma 16, as does the structure in which they are organized. Most sins in Alma 16 have strong correspondences with those listed in Mark 7. In the King James Version of Mark, four of them—adulteries, murders, deceit, and lasciviousness—correspond precisely to sins from the list in Alma 16. The triad of stealing, robbing, and plundering in Alma 16 aligns conceptually with “thefts” in Mark 7:22. The word translated *wickedness* in Mark 7:22 is translated as “malice” in the New International Version (NIV), matching the use of the word *malice* in Alma 16. Alma 16 lists both “lyings and deceivings” which correspond with Mark’s “deceit.” Alma’s “revilings” ties well with Mark’s “blasphemy,” and Alma’s “envyings” parallels Mark’s “covetousness” in the KJV or “envy” in the NIV and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

It is a valuable pursuit to consult multiple translations of these verses from Mark, to be able to explicate further structural meaning within Alma 16:18. Again, the King James Version of Mark 7:20–23 appears to show a list of thirteen sins, whereas the NIV and the NRSV both catalog twelve sins. The KJV of Mark 7:21 begins, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications . . .” This translation makes “evil thoughts” a thirteenth sin, instead of separating it from the twelve sins that follow. The NIV translation of Mark 7:21–22 states: “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.”⁷ It treats the twelve sins as all proceeding from “evil thoughts.” The use of an em dash (—) makes this separation even more clear. The NRSV follows the same treatment as the NIV. Mark 7:21 of the NRSV begins thus: “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”⁸ This is followed by the twelve sins. The NRSV utilizes a colon in the same manner as the NIV uses an em dash to separate “evil intentions” from the twelve sins to come.

Why does this matter? John Dart, in his book *Decoding Mark*, identifies a chiasmic structure for Mark 7:20–23 with the twelve sins as the central elements as shown below:⁹

7. *New International Version, Bible Gateway*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207&version=NIV>.

8. *New Revised Standard Version, Bible Gateway*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207&version=NRSVUE>.

9. John Dart, *Decoding Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003): 125.

- A** What comes out of a man is what defiles a man.
- B** For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts:
 - C** fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness,
 - C'** deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.
- B'** All these evil things come from within,
- A'** and they defile a man.

The English translation of the Book of Mormon may hide a potential correspondence between these twelve sins in Mark and those listed in Alma, which could affect the structure of the chiasm in Alma 16:13–21. In Greek, the first six sins in Mark 7:21–22 are plural nouns; the next six are singular nouns. In Alma 16:18, the first six sins listed are also all plural nouns except for the word *malice*, and then the next six sins are in the singular. The word *malice* is typically not pluralized in English. In Greek, however, the word translated as “wickedness” in the KJV of Mark 7:22 comes from the Greek word *poneriai* (πονηρίαί) which is a plural noun meaning acts of wickedness or malicious deeds.¹⁰ It is translated as “malice” in the NIV of Mark 7:22. As the word *malice* is surrounded by plural nouns in Alma 16:18, it is reasonable to assume that this use of the word could also be treated in a plural form.

Another reason for grouping the twelve sins in Alma 16 into two groups of six sins each can be derived from the use of the word *and* within this verse. Verse 18 begins, “Now those priests . . . did preach against all lyings and deceivings and envyings and strifes and malice and revilings and stealing, robbing, plundering, murdering, committing adultery, and all manner of lasciviousness.” The word *and* is used after each sin, up until the word *stealing*. Then it appears that the word *stealing* is grouped with the next five sins since the word *and* is not used again, until it comes before the last sin in the list, in which the word *and* would typically be used with any list.

Based on these factors, the chiasm for Alma 16:13–21 could then have two parallel central elements. The first central element includes the list of six plural nouns, preceded by the phrase *preach against*. The second central element includes the list of six singular nouns, succeeded by the phrase *crying that these things ought not so to be*, which corresponds well with the phrase *preach against* in the first central element. This second set of six also includes much weightier sins than those in the first set.

This correspondence between Alma 16 and Mark 7 could easily be

10. United Bible Societies, “Translation Commentary on Mark 7:21–Mark 7:22,” <https://tips.translation.bible/story/translation-commentary-on-mark-721-722>.

coincidental, yet it is an intriguing possibility that the authors intentionally organized this list of sins by breaking them down into six plural nouns followed by six singular nouns, with the graver sins appearing last. With the additional evidence of a deliberate and thoughtful design for the contents of this chapter, it appears that this catalog of sins was also organized intentionally, further highlighting the chiasmic structure.

Analyzing the Strength of the Proposed Five-Element Chiasm

This chiasm exhibits pronounced framing by the means of two key phrases—*preach the word* and *establishment of the church*—located in the first and last elements of the chiasm. As discussed in the correspondences above, these two key phrases appear in inverted order in their second occurrence. Other keywords and phrases from these verses are also repeated in inverted order in their second occurrence, as is evident from reviewing the supplemental chiasmic structure.

At first glance, this supplemental structure appears to be more elegant and organized than the five-element chiasm based on the five sub-units. The six paired elements in this structure have obvious verbal parallels, based on keywords and phrases from the text. Key phrases in elements A, B, and D can be further divided into keywords which appear in inverted order in elements A', B', and D', respectively. However, the structure leaves too many gaps from the text to be a comprehensive structure for the entire unit. Parallels rich with meaning, such as "receiving the word with joy" in element B of the five-element chiasm—with its parallel in B' of hearing or receiving the word with great joy and gladness—are not included in the supplemental view above, but are included in the five-element chiasm. The link between the word in B and the Son of God's coming, sufferings, death, and resurrection in B' would also be missed.

Other factors provide evidence of authorial intent behind this five-element chiasmic structure. First, there are numerous correspondences between paired units. The more correspondences there are, the stronger the likelihood that the structure was consciously constructed by the author. Second, there are clear instances of amplification among parallel phrases from paired elements. For example, "the establishment of the church became general throughout the land" in element A is amplified to "the church [is] established throughout all the land" in A'. "Joy" in element B becomes "great joy and gladness" in element B'. Finally, the theme of preaching is highlighted in the central

element, as well as in the first and last elements in the structure. The list of twelve sins in the center also appears to have been deliberately divided into two groups of six sins each, with the second set more serious in nature, the first six as plural nouns and the last six as singular nouns.

Key Insights and Findings

Once literary structures have been identified and analyzed for their validity and intentionality, the critical step of interpretation can occur. For example, what (if any) additional meaning can be derived from how the text is organized? Also, in addition to the literary beauty and elegance exhibited by chiasmic structures such as these, we may ask what interpretive function do they serve in this instance?

These two chiasms in Alma 16 work together to highlight some illuminating similarities and contrasts.¹¹ Four such points will be examined.

First, the theme of destruction in the first chiasm contrasts with the establishment or construction of the church, and the work which is done to keep people from going on to destruction in the second chiasm. In the first chiasm, elements E, F, F', and E' focus on the destruction of the city of Ammonihah and of its inhabitants. The words *destroy* or *destroyed* appear five times in verses 2, 3, and 9. In contrast, in element B in the second chiasm, the Spirit is poured out upon the land to prepare people to receive the word "that they might not . . . go on to destruction" (v. 17). The establishment of the church is a prominent theme in the second chiasm, emphasized in its first and last elements (A and A'). This building up of the church contrasts with the great destruction which occurs in Ammonihah. There is also mention of the temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues which were "built" (v. 13).

Second, both units incorporate the theme of inquiry. "Alma inquired of the Lord" (v. 6) in the first chiasm's central element concerning whither the Nephites should go in search of their brethren who had been taken captive. In the second unit, "the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come" (v. 20). The words *inquire* and *inquired* only occur in these two instances in this chapter. Both inquiries regard the question of location. Interestingly, it appears that Alma is told where the Nephite armies should go in the first unit, but the people in the second unit are given an answer

11. Special thanks to Rebecca Lambert for identifying many of the findings shared in this section.

regarding when the Son of God would appear unto them, instead of receiving a direct answer to their initial inquiry of where he would come.

Third, "physical deliverance" in the first unit parallels "spiritual deliverance" in the second unit. In the first unit, the Nephite captives are eventually delivered from their enemies, the Lamanites, due to their reliance on and obedience to the prayers and revelation of the prophet, Alma. In the second unit, the people are given a list of commandments and principles which, if followed, would bring the power and protection of Christ into their lives and grant them victory over their true enemy—the devil. In the first unit, Alma promises that "the Lord will deliver unto thee thy brethren who have been taken captive by the Lamanites" (v. 6). Fulfillment of this promise comes two verses later as "they took their brethren which had been taken captive by the Lamanites; and there was not one soul of them which had been lost that were taken captive" (v. 8). An even bolder statement of deliverance is provided in the conclusion to the second unit. In verse 21, after the Church had been established throughout all the land, we are told that the people "got the victory over the devil." A complete spiritual deliverance was thus obtained. This also contrasts with the complete lack of physical deliverance experienced by the people of Ammonihah in the first unit; instead of physical deliverance, the wicked suffer divine judgment.

Fourth, the temporal is again compared with the spiritual, regarding peace. The first chiasm is framed in elements A and A' with descriptions of temporal peace. In the second unit, a type of spiritual peace is promised to those who "receive the word with joy," as well as being blessed to "enter into the rest of the Lord their God" (v. 17). Peace is achieved in the first unit by removing an external threat (the Lamanite army) and an internal source of corruption (the city of Ammonihah). In the second unit, peace is solidified by removing internal, spiritual threats from the lives of believers (the twelve sins) and establishing an external institution (the Church) throughout all the land.

In addition to these four insights, the incredible skill and literary sophistication on display in the Book of Mormon must be acknowledged, even in what some may consider to be a more temporal chapter. Inspired thought and considerable effort have gone into the choice of words and the organization of the material; for both aesthetic and interpretive purposes. The Book of Mormon is truly a marvelous work and a wonder!

Appendix: Identifying Individual Units in Alma 16

Alma 16 consists of two major literary units delimited by coherent themes, verbal parallels, and chronological markers. The analysis of delimiting these two units is detailed below, in addition to the sub-units of the second unit.

Unit A (Alma 16:1–12)

The first major unit in Alma 16 encompasses the first twelve verses. It is well framed by the matching outer elements in the chiasm. “Much peace” in verse 1 pairs with “continual peace” in verse 12. Verses 1 and 12 both include a date reference marking the passage of time: “for a certain number of years” in verse 1; “for three years” in verse 12. The correspondences continue with mention of war in verses 1 and 12, references to the Lamanites in verses 2 and 12, and so on, according to the paired elements in the chiasm. The strength inherent in this framing overrides what would otherwise appear to be a natural frame for verses 1–9; the recording of the eleventh year being noted twice in verse 1 and then again in verse 9. However, the twenty-three element chiasm discussed above shows that these twelve verses comprise a distinct literary unit. The paired elements in the chiasm share many striking verbal parallels, either appearing in many cases in an inverted order in their second occurrence, or showing amplification or intensification, providing further evidence of possible authorial intent behind the chiasm.

The theme of war is consistent throughout this unit, from the first mention in verse 1 to the last mention in verse 12. In between, the Lamanites attack and destroy the city of Ammonihah and carry away Nephites captive into the wilderness. The Nephite armies rescue these captives, aided by a revelation given to Alma, after he inquired of the Lord to know their location.

Unit B (Alma 16:13–21)

The theme of the universal spread of the preaching of the word and the general establishment of the church throughout all the land gives this unit its cohesiveness. The word *all* occurs eight times in this rather short unit, and other descriptions are given in different terms, also emphasizing the theme of totality. The unit begins with a list of three locations in which Alma and Amulek preach, highlighting the extensiveness of their efforts to share the word of God. They preach in the temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues. They also preached

the word "without any respect of persons" (16:14). Thus, every person who desired to listen to their words was afforded the opportunity. Not only did Alma and Amulek preach the word to whomever would listen, but emphasis is also given to the frequency and scope of their teaching. As to the frequency of their preaching, they imparted the word of God "continually" (16:14); and in verse 15, many more were chosen "to preach the word throughout all the land. And the establishment of the church became general throughout the land, in all the region round about, among all the people of the Nephites." This verse — in several ways — highlights the scope of their preaching. Key phrases include *throughout all the land*, *general throughout the land*, *in all the region round about*, and *among all the people of the Nephites*. This theme continues in the remainder of this unit. In verse 16, "the Lord did pour out his Spirit on *all* the face of the land" (emphasis added). In verse 18, the extent of preaching is described as full or complete in a different manner: the priests "did preach against *all* lyings and deceivings . . . and *all* manner of lasciviousness" (emphasis added). In the last verse of this unit, verse 21, this theme comes to a fitting climax and conclusion: "And now after the church had been established *throughout all the land*, . . . and the word of God being preached in its purity *in all the land*" (emphasis added).

The Five Sub-units of Alma 16:13–21

This unit consists of five distinct sub-units. The first includes verses 13–15; the theme being referenced in each of the three verses is preaching or imparting the word of God. Many people, in addition to Alma and Amulek, are chosen to preach the word. This leads to the establishment of the church throughout the land.

The shift to a new theme in verse 16 signals the beginning of the second sub-unit, consisting of verses 16 and 17. The Book of Mormon printer's manuscript adds the word *for* in verse 16, so the verse begins in the following way: "And there was no inequality¹² among them, for the Lord did pour out his Spirit on all the face of the land." Grant Hardy, commenting on this verse, observes: "The reading of [the printer's manuscript] makes it clear that the lack of inequality was a consequence rather than a cause of the Lord pouring out his Spirit."¹³ The

12. The printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon says "unequality," but I use "inequality" for clarity.

13. *The Annotated Book of Mormon*, ed. Grant Hardy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023), 358.

theme of this sub-unit is *receiving the word*. In these two verses, the phrase *receive the word* occurs twice, along with the phrase *not be hardened against the word* in verse 17.

Verse 18 comprises the third and central sub-unit. It is tightly framed by the phrases *preach against* and *crying that these things ought not so to be*, along with the list of twelve sins in between. This list divides into two groups of six each. The first six sins are in the plural form, whereas the last six sins are in the singular. As noted in the above section, “Supplemental Twelve-element Chiastic Structure for Alma 16:13–21,” the components of this verse are organized chiastically.

The fourth sub-unit consists of verses 19 and 20. One could conclude that verse 19 belongs with verse 18, because “holding forth” at the beginning of verse 19 is a present participle, as is “crying” at the end of verse 18. However, verse 19 shares more in common with verse 20, including the themes of the coming of the Son of God, along with His resurrection. Also, the chiastic structure of verse 18 — with its distinct outer frames — makes this verse its own sub-unit. The title *Son of God* appears in verses 19 and 20, and nowhere else in the unit. The word *resurrection* also appears once in each of these two verses and nowhere else in the unit. Thus, the theme of the coming of the resurrected Son of God dominates these two verses. Verse 19 cites his coming twice: “Holding forth things which must shortly come” and “holding forth the coming of the Son of God.” Verse 20 also references his coming twice, in consideration of where and when he would come: “Many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come,” and “they were taught that he would appear unto them after his resurrection.”

The fifth and final sub-unit within this unit consists solely of verse 21. A shift in themes is evident, from the preceding sub-unit’s theme of the coming of the Son of God, then back to prominent themes from the first sub-unit — including the establishment of the church throughout all the land and the word of God being preached in all the land. This verse brings the unit and chapter to its conclusion by noting the end of the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges; which forms an inclusion, with the end of verse 12 in which the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges is first mentioned, leaving verses 13–21 as a distinct literary unit. The end of this unit and sub-unit is clearly delineated by the heading which introduces the next major account in the book of

Alma — the account of the sons of Mosiah preaching the word of God to the Lamanites.



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