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Chiasmus in Mesoamerican Texts

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Chapter 67
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Helaman 6:7-13

The growing literature on chiasmus deals generally with its use in the Near East and Mediterranean areas.¹ Some students of the Book of Mormon have wondered if the same form might appear in the New World, but until now the labor required to demonstrate it had not been done.

Allen J. Christenson has completed a substantial paper in this regard, investigating thirty-seven native Mayan texts. After reading the manuscript, renowned expert Munro Edmonson said, "It is rare to encounter this kind of dedication and clarity in academic work." He phrased his congratulatory comment in the form of "an enthusiastic chiasmus"—a balanced four-paragraph letter.

While large numbers of hieroglyphic codices were destroyed by the Spanish invaders, some Indians quickly learned Spanish characters and used them to record part of what had been in those books. The most famous of these is the *Popol Vuh*. Christenson displays over fifty significant chiasms in sixteen of these records. Most are from highland Guatemala, but some are from the Yucatan. Those containing chiasms generally meet the following criteria: the original (1) was composed prior to 1575; (2) was written in Mayan and the original text is available; (3) was authored by a member of the ruling lineage; (4) contains internal evidence of having been based on a pre-Columbian codex; (5) includes significant references to pre-Spanish mythology and religion; and (6) is free of notable Christian or European influence.

Two-, three-, and four-line chiasms are numerous in these texts, but longer, complex examples are also evident. For instance, the initial section of the *Popol Vuh*, dealing with the creation of the world, is arranged as a chiasm. Each phase of creation is given in detail from primordial darkness to the formation of the mountains. For example:

Oh Heart of Heaven,

and once it had been created,
the earth,
the mountains and valleys,
the paths of the waters were
divided
and they proceeded to twist along
among the hills.

So the rivers then became more
divided

as the great mountains were
appearing.

And thus was the creation of the
earth

when it was created by him

who is the Heart of Heaven.

The final portion of the section then recapitulates the main events in reverse order.² The *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, meanwhile, involves a seven-element chiasm incorporating two subordinate chiasms inside it.³

Many early colonial native texts did not use chiasmus. Those that did all contain passages of dialogue, an indicator of dependence on a pre-Columbian codex. Interestingly, none of the highland Maya documents composed after 1580 included chiastic passages. Christenson argues that this is evidence that chiasmus had a distinct history as a learned poetic form among these people before the Conquest.

Many implications of Christenson's work remain to be explored. The late Sir Eric Thompson once said, "There are close parallels in Maya transcriptions of the colonial period, and, I am convinced, in the hieroglyphic texts themselves, to the [two-line parallel] verses of the Psalms, and the poetry of Job," but when chiasmus proper was drawn to his attention in 1970, he could point only to brief hints of it in the native texts.⁴ The work by Christenson focuses new attention on Mesoamerican poetic form with the possibility of further breakthroughs.

Based on research by Allen J. Christenson, January 1988. Following the publication of this Update, part of Christenson's work appeared as "The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient Quiche-Maya," Latin American Literatures Journal 4, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 125-50. His full research was published as "The Use of Chiasmus in Ancient Mesoamerica" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1988); and a short report appeared in "Chiasmus in Mayan Texts," Ensign 18 (October 1988): 28-31.

Footnotes

1. For example, John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981).
2. See Munro Edmonson, *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh*, Tulane Univ., Middle Amer. Research Inst. Publ. 35 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1971), 9-13.
3. The text is in Daniel G. Brinton, *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Philadelphia: Brinton's Library of Aboriginal American Literature, 1885), 75-77.
4. See Eric Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 2:61-62, and personal communication to John L. Sorenson.