This essay analyzes examples of poetry in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon that do not conform to the standards to which prose is typically confined. Each of these poems contains a syntactic device that scholars have come to identify by the term *enallage* (Greek for “interchange”). Rather than being a case of textual corruption or blatant error, the grammatical variance attested in these passages provides a poetic articulation of a progression from distance to proximity.
One of the greatest advancements in biblical studies since the time of Joseph Smith has been the recognition and analysis of poetic conventions in the Hebrew Bible. In recent years, scholars have begun to perceive what should have always been apparent: Biblical poetry operates according to specific literary premises that transcend the norms of ordinary tradition. One such provision includes the precedent for grammatical variance. This essay analyzes examples of poetry in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon that do not conform to the same standards to which prose is typically confined. Each of these poems contains a syntactic device that scholars have come to identify by the term *enallage* (Greek for “interchange”). Rather than a case of textual corruption or blatant error, the grammatical variance attested in these passages provides a poetic articulation of a progression from distance to proximity.
The word *enallage* refers to a grammatical convention that allows an author to switch personage in order to secure a deliberate literary effect. This important example of semantic variance appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. “So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked,” sang Moses to the congregation of Israel, “you grew fat and gross and coarse” (Deuteronomy 32:15). As witnessed in this Deuteronomic passage, enallage often signifies a movement from distance to proximity. In other words, after speaking of an individual in the third person (e.g., he, she, them) a poet will at times switch to second-person references (you singular, or you plural) in order to portray a special emotional attachment to the subject of his address. While a sudden shift in personage would seem highly inappropriate in prose, grammatical variations such as this actually typify poetry of the West-Semitic sphere. In any case, this deliberate syntactic device seems to contain a highly poetic objective.

Poetic use of enallage expressing a movement from distance to proximity appears in the Song of Solomon 1:2: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,” declares the female vocalist of the “Choicest Song,” as she appeals to her lover in third-person address. Then, in an emotional shift that poetically draws the lover into the woman’s presence, she declares, “for *your* love is better than wine.” Many attempts at correcting this apparent difficulty have been suggested over the years. Proposals have ranged from amending the text to envisioning the woman calling out to an assembly similar to the Greek chorus. Yet in addressing this issue, one scholar has insightfully observed, “the assumption of more than two speakers is fanciful; it seems best to leave the text unaltered since enallage (shift in person) is common in poetry.” And what is the poetic function of enallage in this passage? Having initially addressed her lover in terms of a distant relationship, the woman is then free to express her closer or more intense attachment with a more direct form of speech.

A similar example of this poetic technique occurs in Jeremiah 22:24–26, “As I live, declares the Lord, if Coniah, son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet on my right hand, I would tear you off even from there; I will deliver you into the hands of those who seek your life. . . . I will hurl you and the mother who bore you into another land, where you were not born; there you shall both die.” In this passage, the divine condemnation conforms to the same literary convention attested in the Song of Songs (though in an obviously negative sense) by first speaking of Coniah in terms of third person and subsequently moving to a more intimate address.

“Truly, *they* shall be shamed of oaks,” declares the Lord of Hosts concerning the rebels and sinners who forsake the covenant, “because of their desire; *you* shall be confounded because of the gardens *you* chose” (Isaiah 1:29). This statement parallels the format of Job’s highly poetic lament: “*He* has truly worn me out; *you* have destroyed my whole community” (Job 16:7). The same pattern also appears in the poetic passage of Micah that praises the redemptive nature of the Lord God: “*He* will take us back in love; *He* will cover up our iniquities, *you* will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19). The progression accomplished in this poem (like those cited above) is meant to be striking: God at a distance; God at a distance; God in proximity.

Perhaps even more significant for the field of Book of Mormon studies is the fact that this well-attested poetic convention occurs in the individual praise recorded in Psalm 23. In this popular Davidic ovation, the poet begins his praise by referring to God in the third person:

> The Lord is my shepherd;  
> I lack nothing.  
> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
> He leads me to still waters.  
> He renews my life;  
> He guides me in right paths  
> as befits *his* name. (Psalm 23:1–3)

At this juncture in the psalm, the same dramatic shift from third person to second person occurs:

> Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,  
> I fear no harm, for *you* are with me;  
> *Your* rod and *your* staff—they comfort me.
You spread a table for me in full view of my
enemies;
my drink is abundant. (Psalm 23:4–5)

The significant point pertaining to these ex-
amples of enallage is that distance prefigures proxim-ity.
in each case, it seems that by beginning a poetic pres-
entation with third-person address, the author is then
free to express his feelings for his subject as if that
individual suddenly stood in the poet’s presence. This
dramatic shift produces an intentional literary effect
that allows the subject, when spoken of in terms of
third person, to share a direct emotional attachment
with the individual offering the oration.9

Interestingly, a similar phenomenon occurs in
the Book of Mormon. In Our Book of Mormon,
Sidney B. Sperry forever christened 2 Nephi 4:16–35
as “The Psalm of Nephi.” According to Sperry, “this
is a true psalm in both form and idea; its rhythm is
comparable to the noble cadence of David’s poems;
it not only praises God, but lays bare to us the very
depths of Nephi’s soul; a study of this psalm reveals
how the scriptures delighted Nephi.”10 In support of
Sperry’s astute observation we might also add the
occurrence of the poetic use of enallage. In a man-
ner comparable to the examples cited above, Nephi
begins his dictation by referring to his subject in the
third person:

My God hath been my support;
He hath led me through mine afflictions
in the wilderness
He hath preserved me upon the waters
of the great deep.
He hath filled me with his love,
even unto the consuming of my flesh
He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the
causing of them to quake before me.
Behold, he hath heard my cry by day,
and given me knowledge by visions in the
night-time. (2 Nephi 4:20–23)

Like the psalmist in Psalm 23 who commences
his praise of deity in the form of third-person
address and then proceeds to commend God with
second-person references, so Nephi achieves a dra-
matic shift in verse 30 by changing his praise
“about” God to a praise directed “to” God:

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
O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul?
Wilt thou deliver me
out of the hands of my enemies....
O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around
in the robe of thy righteousness!
O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape
before my enemies....
O Lord, I have trusted in thee,
and I will trust in thee forever.
(2 Nephi 4:30–34)

At the conclusion of his praise, Nephi returns to
the original poetic formula by referring to his sub-
ject in the third person:

Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him
that asketh.
Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss.
(2 Nephi 4:35)

After communicating to God in a more removed
sense, Nephi finishes his psalm by again speaking
directly to God with second-person acclamation:

Therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee;
Yea, I will cry unto thee, my God,
The rock of my righteousness.
Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto
thee,
my rock and mine everlasting God. Amen.
(2 Nephi 4:35)

Nephi’s psalm follows the same literary trend of
grammatical variance attested in a survey of biblical
poetry. Based on an analogy with the above forms,
the switch from third to second person witnessed in
Nephi’s psalm can in no way be described as a blun-
der in syntax. Just as the Davidic psalm progresses
poetically from distance to proximity, so the psalm
of Nephi provides a dramatic portrayal of the poet’s
intimacy with God by following the same continu-
ance. This connection suggests a possible key for
unlocking one of the meanings of enallage in
Hebrew poetry as a syntactic device that allows a
character to progress from a location of distance to
proximity in relationship to the Semitic poet.


61 For a discussion of the hypocoristic nature of names in Hebrew, see an extensive listing of examples, see Avigad and Sass, West Semitic Stamp Seals, 41/1. How the Guide to English Pronunciation of Book of Mormon Names Came About Mary Jane Woolery The illustration at the beginning of this feature is Joseph Smith Translated by Dale Kilborn. © Courtesy Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission.

1 Joseph Smith, a letter to John Wentworth, Editor of the Chicago Democrat, 1 March 1842, History of the Church, 4:527.


4 Ibid.


10 History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1979), 132-44. This identification has been challenged on the grounds that the vocalization of Malek would not allow it to be hypocoristic for Hebrew Mishkail(6). See David Rolph Sczyr in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 5 (1993): 311-15.


The Deseret Alphabet as an Aid in Pronouncing Book of Mormon Names Frederick M. Huchel


From Distance to Proximity: A Poetic Function of Enallage in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon David Bokovoy


3 Not every instance of enallage in the Hebrew Bible conforms to this specific model (e.g., third person to second person). Examples of the shift from second to third person include Genesis 49:4; Isaiah 22:16, 31; Isaiah 22:40, 14:81; Psalms 121:8; Jeremiah 22:18; Malachi 2:15; Isaiah 11:22. For shifts from first to third person see Lamentations 3:1 and Isaiah 22:19. For an interpretation of the intentional switch from second to third person, see Barney, "Divine Discourse." 4 This literary tool is witnessed in several forms, including the latvisms in biblical texts, to noncompleted aspects that preserves the original notion of either a past or future tense. See, for example, Moshe Held, "The QOL-QLT: Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and in Ugaritic," in Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman ed. Meir Ben-Horin, Bernard D. Weinryb, and Solomon Zeltin (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 281-90. 5 It is hardly surprising to find the poetic use of enallage opening the Song of Songs since this book has long been recognized as the most highly poetic work in the Hebrew Bible. The term Song of Songs (Song of Solomon in the KJV) is an example of the development of the biblical Hebrew. The title means "the choicest or best" song see E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., Gezerite Hebrew Grammar (New York: Oxford University Press, 1910), 431. 6 Marvin H. Pope, Song of Songs (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 297. 7 The last two examples of you in Jeremiah 22:24-26 are second-person masculine plural forms. In this passage, the progres-
sion is from third person to second per-
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above translation reflects the suggestions
discussed in Gesenius/ Hebrew Grammar,
462. Though one may question the valid-
ity of this reading, enallage is still attested
in the movement from third to second
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9 As noted above, the pattern seems to be
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cidence or textual corruption.
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Paul Henning: The First Mormon
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Robert W. Fullner

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University Presidential File, Cluff
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