

# A LETTER FROM LIBERTY JAIL

Dictated by Joseph Smith, Jr.

20-28 March 1839

Formatted by  
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## INTRODUCTION

On Friday, 30 November 1838, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Lyman Wight, Alexander McRae, Caleb Baldwin, and Sidney Rigdon were incarcerated in the jail at Liberty, Missouri, having been charged with treason against the state of Missouri.[1] They spent four and a half winter months in the dungeon, without heat, adequate food, beds or sanitary facilities. (Sidney was released before the end.) Meanwhile, the Saints were being violently driven from the state, suffering murder, rape, plundering and other crimes under the hands of the mobs. Many trusted early leaders had been excommunicated, including seven members of the quorum of the Twelve.[2]

Joseph's wife, Emma, wrote a heart-rending letter to him on 7 March, which he received on 19 March, along with letters from his brothers Don Carlos and William, and from Bishop Edward Partridge.[3] She told of the sufferings of her and the children as they were driven from their home, able to take little besides themselves, and of the sufferings of the others. The next day Joseph began dictating a letter "To the Church of Latter-day Saints at Quincy, and Scattered Abroad, and to Bishop Partridge in Particular",[4],[5] which was signed by all five prisoners and sent to Emma. She was to keep the original and have copies made for the Prophet's parents and the church.[6]

Orson Pratt, acting under the direction of Brigham Young, extracted portions of the letter for inclusion in the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as sections 121, 122, and 123. This edition was accepted as scripture by the church in Conference in 1880.[7]

These sections contain some of the finest and best-loved counsel in all of scripture on adversity, unrighteous dominion, and the receipt of revealed knowledge by the saints. Although much less well known, the balance of the letter contains some choice nuggets, "left for us to mine out for ourselves." [8] The present project is presented to this end.

My discovery of the letter came in 1989 while studying Section 121 for the Sunday School Gospel Doctrine class. I had already reprinted the Doctrine and Covenants in a formatted form to show the parallel literary and conceptual patterns that are common to all books of scripture, and discovered that the breaks that occur in Section 121 in the letter agree with the major structures I had already found in that section.

In 1991 Everett L. Butler provided a copy of the letter on a computer disk, and I explored it in detail for possible parallel patterns. The result, along with the original patterns found in the canonized portions, follows. In June, 1993, I compared the text from the History of the Church with the transcript edited by Jesse and restored some of the text that had been changed in the History. The insertions are in italics, while the deleted words are enclosed in braces.

It is imperative for the reader to understand that the formatted version presented herein is neither definitive nor necessarily unique, but merely represents one man's opinions. There often are alternative ways of presenting parallelism in scripture. Some people find the formatted versions beautiful or helpful in finding the meanings of scripture, and others find them distracting or confusing. If the latter is so, the reader is invited to disregard this document and read the letter in the History of the Church, Volume III, pages 289-305. In any event, one must not allow any discussion of the format to interfere in the least with consideration of what is written. The interested reader is invited to find improvements in the formatting, and surely will do so if an attempt is made.

In the pages that follow, the parallelisms are indicated by equal levels of indentation. Capital or lower case letters were added in front of the elements of the more extensive units to guide the eye. Within a given element, so marked by a letter, sub-elements are indicated by further indentation. No alphabetic letters are applied to some of the more compact units, but the parallelism is shown simply by indentation.

The most common parallel forms found in the scriptures are inverted parallel or chiasmus (element sequence **A B C B A**), and direct parallel (**A B C A B C**). In the former, the turning point, **C** in this case, is the point of emphasis of the passage. This turning point may contain one, two, or more parallel elements. Often direct parallel structures contain a point of emphasis, in which case the element sequence is of the form **A B C A B C D**, with the emphasis in **D**.

A third form can be thought of as random parallelism. Here, each element is repeated exactly once, except perhaps the turning point, but in no particular order. A particularly beautiful example is the prayer offered by Joseph Smith in the Liberty jail, recorded in 121:1-6. Here, the first part consists of questions to God. The turning point is a statement of the greatness and power of God, and the balance of the prayer is petitions that match the questions precisely. It is intriguing to note that the passage can be rearranged to read as a powerful inverted parallel system.

One can speculate about why it was not written as such. Perhaps the Prophet had discovered the fact that the Lord often uses parallelism, but hadn't noticed the inverted form. On the other hand, the prayer may have been given by revelation. The Lord's answer is in an inverted pattern, including the deepest unit discovered in the Doctrine and Covenants.

The fourth commonly occurring structural form in the scriptures is the list, where several related items are tabulated. The number of elements in these lists often bears interesting relationships to biblical number symbolism.[9]

One wonders why the Lord chose to couch so many of His revelations in these forms. Various scholars have speculated about this question, citing ease of memorization, poetic form, and so forth. Brown suggests that "Parallel form may have a greater influence on the human soul than we realize." [10] The following points might be considered:

- The Lord teaches by repetition in ways that don't appear to be repetitious. The matching elements of chiasmic or direct parallel structures support and help define each other, with the result that the meanings are made more clear without additional words of explanation. In fact, an understanding of the structure is an important aid in understanding the original intent of the author.
- One is almost forced to consider the scriptures more carefully, with more pondering in depth. New insights are gained, particularly when matching elements do not at first appear to match, but their placement is forced by the structure. Further consideration often reveals previously un-noticed relationships and deeper understanding.
- The context of a passage is more easily discerned.
- The language carries a power and impact that derives, in part, from the structure.
- The Lord uses these forms as patterns to help His children recognize the revealed scriptures.[11] They are difficult to imitate, yet the modern scriptures came forth when only a small handful of scholars were aware of the pattern.

It must be stated that the study of parallel forms in the scriptures is in an early state of development. It must be emphasized that there often is more than one way to represent a particular passage, and different people may prefer different forms. Above all, one must not lose sight of the messages of the scriptures through arguing the structure. Again, the work that follows is presented only as one man's view, and must not be considered as more than that.

One might wonder why chiasmus and other scriptural parallel forms appear in the parts of the Liberty Jail letter that were not canonized. The parts that are in the Doctrine and Covenants are clearly distinct from the rest of the letter in content and style. Yet, the voice of inspiration is evident in the Prophet's words. It is my opinion that most or all of the letter was written under the power of inspiration, some of it recorded in Brother Joseph's words, and some in the Lord's, but most of it flowing in the patterns that are so typical of the scriptures.

Some might argue that the occurrence of chiasmus in the portions of the letter between the recognized revelations indicates that the Prophet Joseph was familiar with this style of writing, and therefore it appears in his personal writings as well as in all of the scriptures that came forth through him. While it may not be easy to rule this out completely, the fact remains that it is extremely difficult to write in meaningful patterns, particularly the inverted pattern of chiasmus. It would be even more difficult to dictate patterned text, which is precisely what Joseph Smith did in Liberty Jail. If he did any of it on his own, he would have to be considered extremely gifted.

After spending literally hundreds of hours investigating chiasmus and other parallelism in the four Standard Works, I have come to the inescapable conclusion that the Spirit is the source of the patterns, as well as the content. The Liberty Jail letter is no exception.

## References

1. History of the Church, Vol III, (1948) p. 214.
2. Robert J. Woodford, "Letters From Liberty Jail", *Hearken, O Ye People*, Randall Book Co., 1984, pp. 219-220.
3. Dean C. Jesse, ed., *The Personal Writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971, pp. 388-389.
4. History of the Church, Volume III, pp. 289-305.
5. Jesse, op. cit., pp. 389-407.
6. Jesse, op. cit., pp 408-409.
7. Woodford, op. cit. p. 220.
8. Keith W. Perkins, "Trials and Tribulations: The Refiner's Fire", *The Capstone of Our Religion*, Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1989, pp. 145-161.
9. E. W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981; Reproduction of first edition published 1894.
10. Wade Brown, *The God-Inspired Language of the Book of Mormon*, Clackamas, OR: Rainbow Press, p. 51, 1988.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 52:14.

## NOTE

The version of the letter found in History of the Church differs from the original manuscript in a few places. The text presented herein follows the transcript in Dean C. Jesse, ed., *The Personal Writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971, pp. 389-407. Words restored from Jesse are in italics, while words deleted from the History of the Church version are enclosed in braces, {}. Judge for yourself which you like better.