

Chiasmus in the scriptures

1. The concept is quite easy but it does challenge some assumptions we make about how we should read Scripture. Chiasmus refers to a sequence of elements of a sentence or verse, paragraph, chapter or even book which are then repeated and developed - but in reverse order. It is sometimes called introverted parallelism. It is best understood through examples. Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath". You can see "sabbath" and "man" are repeated in the sentence but in reverse order. This gives symmetry to the sentence which succinctly makes the point memorable.

2. If we give the elements of the sentence a marker to show the parallels - say "sabbath" is A and "man" is B - we can represent the sentence "The sabbath (A) was made for man (B), not man (B') for the sabbath (A)" as ABB'A'. The reversal of the AB order - to B'A' - is what makes this a chiasm.

3. We can see a slightly more complex pattern in Genesis 9:6 ESV which follows the word order in the Hebrew text. (If you look at the KJV for this verse it changes the word order - "man's blood" instead of "blood of man" and thereby slightly obscures the precision of the chiasm). So the pattern, displayed below, is ABCC'B'A'.

(A) Whoever sheds
 (B) the **blood**
 (C) of man
 (C') by man
 (B') shall his **blood**
(A') be shed

4. When the pattern has a single central clause such as ABCB'A'. The effect of this pattern is to give prominence to the central statement, which can therefore be the main point of the passage, or at least considered as the pivot or turning point of the passage. Take for example an ABCB'A' chiasm in John 4.

A (23a) But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father **in spirit and in truth:**

B (23b) for the Father seeketh such to **worship him.**

C (24a) **God is a Spirit:**

B' (24b) and they that **worship him**

A' (24c) must worship him **in spirit and in truth.**

5. When this passage in John 4:23-24 is read the repetition is immediately apparent. You may already have these key phrases underlined because they are echoes of the words of Joshua when he came to Shechem. But if you had these marked in you might have wondered why the repetition is there because the logic is not so easy to follow. This is where we need to readjust our approach. The linear logic we are used to in our culture, where points are made in one direction leading to a conclusion at the end of the line, is not the logic of chiasmic passages. The main point is at the centre - God is a Spirit, and from this follows why we should worship Him in spirit.

6. Another even more complex but lovely pattern can be found in 1 Peter 1:23-25.

A (23a) Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God,

B (23b) which liveth and abideth for ever.

C (24a) For all flesh is as grass,

D (24b) and all the glory of man as the flower of grass.

C' (24c) The grass withereth,

D' (24d) and the flower thereof falleth away:

B' (25a) But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

A' (25b) And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

7. What this chiasmic structure, as others, invites us to do is to view the passage as a whole. The pairs of clauses i.e. AA', BB', should be compared or contrasted. They make sense if we were to read the two together. So the sense of AA' is that we are born again by receiving the Word of God which comes to us through the preaching of the Gospel - simple! The components of the next pair BB' are almost identical in thought and give due emphasis to the eternal purpose of God revealed in the Gospel. In this case the middle section is a four line passage which has a regular parallelism – CDC'D'. The subject is grass then flower, grass then flower. Looking at the passage as a whole it presents us with the thought of our fleeting mortality at the centre, wrapped around by the message of the hope of eternal life through the Gospel.

8. So how common are chiasmic structures? The academic study of chiasmus in modern times can be dated to the work of Nils Wilhelm Lund who published articles in 1930 and 1931 and then a book entitled "Chiasmus in the New Testament" in 1942. The book was republished in 1992 and the Preface written by two academics summarises the reception of the original book. Some thought the book revolutionary but others were more wary and were not so convinced. Some writers are cautious because they fear the imagination of the reader may play too big a part. Some have found the structures developed by Bullinger in the Companion Bible often are too far stretched. However, in more recent times the number of academic publications pointing out chiasmus across Scripture has increased considerably. Bear in mind that chiasmus was well understood in ancient literature by the Jews and Greeks.

9. Certainly in our own small group we have been impressed with the frequency and power of these patterns to open up passages and focus on key thoughts and exhortations. The aim of these notes is to encourage others to realise that they can detect chiasmic patterns for themselves just by doing the readings carefully. We don't need to be erudite and we don't need to know the original languages. Look out for repetition of words and phrases and see if you can find a pattern. The parallel sets, i.e. AA' should have a common key word or phrase, or sometimes a contrasting phrase. The centre should be a highly significant point (although at first sight we sometimes struggle to see why!). Everyone who gets the idea finds that it causes them to read and re-read a passage. We have found it has opened a new window on the Scriptures which intensifies our interest and appreciation of the Word. Once you have seen a good chiasm you will be convinced, excited, even awestruck.

10. Most of the examples on this website are those collected together since April 2014 mainly identified through daily Bible reading. Setting out text with colour codes and indents certainly helps to see the pattern but beware that they can also mislead. Decide yourself if they are convincing. Many of the patterns that we have discovered have also been discovered by others. Far from being disappointing this acts as an independent verification of the chiasm. There is no room for possessiveness or competitiveness with the Word of God.

11. The chiasms we have discovered from the readings tend to cover a few verses or sometimes a chapter. Academics have pointed out larger scale chiasms that cover whole books or groups of books of Scripture. Acceptance of these patterns requires detailed and comprehensive study.

Having done studies on Habakkuk recently I now realise that it has a grand chiasmic structure of 7 parts which fall into an ABCDC'B'A' pattern, and as one would hope and even expect, the central section is the one that contains the dramatic statement - "The just shall live by his faith"!

12. Here are some thoughts on the benefit of recognising chiasmus. For me it has been revolutionary. Too often I have failed to follow satisfactorily the "flow of thought" of a passage and sometimes I have found sections of scripture to be overly repetitious and apparently "disorganised". Maybe you have felt like that at times. Once the chiasmic structure has been recognised far from the text seeming awkward and repetitious it becomes elegant and beautiful. Pairs may help interpret each other. The middle section draws out the main point and leaves us in no doubt as to what it is all about.

13. Chiasmic patterns rightly discerned, as other literary features of scripture, are an integral part of the revelation of the Word of God, so recognising these patterns is not superimposing something artificial on the text, rather we are discovering features of the Word as the Lord has written it.

14. For those who want to follow closely the train of thought of Scripture then attention to structure is essential. Parallel units will help interpret each other. The middle section draws out the main point and usually leaves us in no doubt as to what the passage is all about.

15. Chiasmus is not a secret Bible Code, although it is often hidden by translations which may obscure the occurrence of repetitions of key words and phrases, and sometimes it is obscured by the numeric verse and chapter divisions.

16. Christ himself taught in chiasmic structures. Take the parable of the workers recruited for a penny a day recorded in Matthew 20. The parable is bounded by the classic chiasm - "the first shall be last, and the last first"(19:30) which is repeated at the end of this parable but in reverse - "the last shall be first, and the first last"(20:16)! In between, the parable is a dramatised chiasm - the first labourers are called up last, and vice versa. This clearly demonstrates that chiasm is a conscious technique in the mind of Christ for teaching disciples.