

Scriptural schemes: The ABCBAs of biblical writing

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“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark 10:31). “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt. 20:16). “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30).

These aphorisms of Jesus might be said to describe a common—and clever—biblical style of writing. Just how extensively chiasmus occurs in the Bible is debated in scholarly circles. But that it is used can hardly be doubted.

Akin to palindromes, chiasmic writing uses words, phrases and ideas from the first half of the passage in reverse order in the second half. Consider, for example, Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed.” In other words, chiasmic word patterns present a forward-and-backward symmetry that is comparable to palindromes such as “Madam I’m Adam,” the first man’s possible greeting to his better half.

While academic studies have identified chiasms in the Old Testament for many decades, some memorable phrases in the Gospels like “peace on earth” and “God so loved the world” are also a part of intricate chiasmic patterns. New Testament scholars attuned to chiasms range from Charles Talbert of Baylor to feminist critic Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and social scientist Bruce Malina, who is one of many Catholic academicians so inclined.

But generally, laments Orthodox priest-professor John Breck in *The Shape of Biblical Language* (1994), “scholars still seem to treat chiasmic patterns merely as literary curiosities, interesting as examples of an author’s artistry but of little significance for interpreting the meaning of a text.” In Paul’s letters, Breck insists in *Scripture in Tradition*, published three years ago, the main points are made at the chiasmic center of a section or of the letter, not at the end. According to Breck, without understanding the principles of “concentric parallelism,” another name for chiasms, in reading the Gospel of John, for example, “one is left with the impression, given by

the vast majority of modern commentaries, that the Gospel is a hodgepodge of traditions” stitched together, reworked and edited by many hands.

Suspensions that chiasms arise not from the texts but from the minds of scholars were spawned by the ambitious nature of *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (1942), a pioneering book by Nils W. Lund, longtime dean at Chicago’s North Park Theological Seminary. In a reprint edition, mixed praise was offered in a new preface by David Scholer (now at Fuller Theological Seminary) and Klyne Snodgrass of North Park. “Lund almost single-handedly drew attention to chiasmus and to its importance for interpretation,” they wrote, but added, “The examples Lund identified often are not convincing, and at times he clearly forced texts to fit his desired pattern.”

In that vein, one New Testament scholar jokingly says chiasms “are fun for the whole family,” meaning that—except for the most obvious, short and well-constructed chiasms—anyone can identify a chiastic pattern over large stretches of text based on subjective choices in matching words and motifs. That scholar, John Kloppenborg of the University of Toronto, said he had in mind some unpersuasive claims by Lund and the late Raymond Brown.

On the other hand, two other scholars aver that they “see” chiasms easily and are able to convey that skill to students. Malina tells his students at Creighton University that a chiasm, like Middle Eastern music, “builds up to the middle point and then reverses itself” in such a way that the many illiterate people of antiquity could have listened to recited chiastic passages and realized when the midpoint was reached and when to expect the finish.

Likewise, Peter Ellis said his graduate students studying the Gospel of John at Fordham University “were absolutely delighted to see how chiasms made many things clear.” Ellis, who retired from Fordham in 1988, expressed “wonderment” over scholarly skepticism: “I have no reasonable explanation for what seems to be extraordinary blindness.”

Just as confident that chiasms proliferate is Robert S. Reid, who has a Ph.D. in ancient rhetorical theory and chairs the University of Dubuque’s communication department. “This compositional phenomenon was well known and the assumed way of reading in antiquity,” said Reid, whose paperback, *Preaching Mark*, sets out chiastic patterns at multiple levels in that gospel.

A disclaimer is in order: As the author of another book proposing full-scale chiastic structures in Mark, I am partial to chiasms. I finished my book unaware of Reid's earlier work. Our independent solutions to the puzzle-like patterns are sometimes similar, but our variations illustrate ongoing debates among aficionados on whether matching themes or matching catchwords are the most decisive deciphering tools. My book also differs by proposing that chiastic patterns support theories about additions and deletions in the earlier version of Mark.

Biblical chiasms have another analogy to palindromes—no rule says a palindrome must have one letter at the pivot (deified) or two (too hot to hoot). The epistles most likely written by Paul tend to use double centers; the Gospel of John seems to prefer single-line centers. Opinions vary on Mark: Reid opts for mostly double centers, Breck for mostly single centers, and I for consistently single-centers.

Consider the most frequent example given in introductions to chiasmus: "The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Instead of seeing this as a four-step chiasm (ABBA), I claim it is best described as a five-step chiasm, conforming to the word order in Greek and Mark's preference for an unpaired center:

A The sabbath
 B for humankind
 C was made
 B' not humankind for
A' the sabbath.

Analysts of Mark typically note the author's puzzling "messianic secret," riddle-like parables and references to the "secret of the kingdom of God." Nonetheless, Mark's Jesus spoke chiastically in assuring followers that all secrets eventually will be revealed, as in Mark 4:21-22 below (Greek words in parentheses):

A And he said to them, "Does a *lamp* come (erchomai)
 B to be put under a bushel or under a bed,
 C and not be put on a *lampstand*?
 D For there is nothing hidden,
 C' except to be *disclosed*;
 B' nor does anything become secret,
A' but to *come* (erchomai) to *light*."

The above rendition differs from the New Revised Standard Version in order to show that “to come” is an unusual verb in verse 21. Joanna Dewey of the Episcopal Divinity School has said that such unexpected usage serves to signal chiasmic links. Skeptics might say, “Well, I might be able to build this chiasm differently by matching the verbs ‘put’ in the first half and the words ‘hidden’ and ‘secret’ in the second half.” That you could. But see the account of this passage on page 25, which shows how it changes shape when seen as part of a slightly larger chiasm.

Inasmuch as 21st-century readers are unfamiliar with this ancient literary device, scholars employ italics and other typographical gimmicks to highlight catchwords and parallel ideas.

“If moderns have lost their appreciation for chiasmus it is because they have been educated in a vastly different way,” said Augustine Stock in writing about elaborate memorization regimens of Greco-Roman education. “Chiasmus afforded a seriously needed element of internal organization in ancient writings, which did not make use of paragraphs, punctuation, capitalization and other such synthetic devices to communicate the conclusion of one idea and the commencement of the next.”

What rules were followed are unknown because chiasms went unmentioned in rhetorical handbooks of the Greek classical period. In fact, chiasmus as an interpretive term does not show up until a Greek text dated between the second century and fourth century. Those concessions are made by an emeritus classics professor, George A. Kennedy, who taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and now lives in Colorado. Kennedy recently repeated his belief that chiasmus was probably known by other terms, such as *commutatio* in Latin, but was applied only to short passages.

“So far as I know, there is no express recognition of large-scale chiasmic arrangement of portions of a text or of a whole work, even though this [is] everywhere found in classical literature,” Kennedy said. He noted that one scholar has even worked out the structure of *The Iliad* “on a vast chiasmic scale.”

Some skeptics of the idea of large chiasmic patterns do recognize what is called *inclusio*, or ring composition, wherein the author clearly repeats wording at the start and end of a long section but does not develop a complex, multistep chiasm along the way.

“I’m skeptical about macro-chiastic patterns which I think are largely imaginary, but not skeptical about large ring composition patterns,” said David E. Aune, who teaches New Testament at Notre Dame. In his *Westminster Dictionary of New Testament & Early Christian Literature & Rhetoric*, published last year, Aune acknowledges the existence of some short chiasms. One covers the five episodes in Mark 2:1–3:6 worked out by many, including Dewey, who argues that the word and stylistic parallels cannot be accidental.

In an interview by e-mail, Aune was asked why chiasms would be any less believable as a literary phenomenon inasmuch as the “diatribe” is also missing from the ancient rhetorical handbooks. Aune’s dictionary describes diatribe as an informal rhetorical dialogue (with imaginary opponents) seen in Greek literature and in Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

“By ‘missing from rhetorical handbooks’ I meant only that chiasms belonged to the realm of the reflexive, culturally ‘lower’ levels of discourse and rhetoric,” Aune replied. “A parallel phenomenon could be the Greek novels, which the upper classes probably read though they’d never admit it.”

He also discussed why he accepts relatively small-scale chiasms as real but regards large-scale proposals as illusory. “Micro-chiasms are clearly part of the surface structure of texts and give them a quasi-poetic quality,” Aune said. “Macro-chiasms, at least the really big ones, are not part of the surface structure because they cannot be picked up by even the most sophisticated reader or hearer.”

That argument strongly appeals to those who emphasize the oral culture of Hellenistic and Jewish societies. Yet all kinds of papyrus codices (instead of scrolls) emerged as nascent Christianity grew. C. Clifton Black, who chairs biblical studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, outlined in *The Rhetoric of the Gospel* (2001) the craft of a literate minority, and noted the “miniature rhetorical masterpiece” in the 13th chapter of Mark. Despite some grammatical roughness in that chapter, “audience contact is maintained by chiastic, coherent, and climactic narration,” Black wrote.

A strongly stated challenge to chiasm enthusiasts was issued by two London scholars in a 1998 issue of *New Testament Studies*. Calling chiasms “a modern scholarly construct,” Stanley Porter and Jeffrey Reed said that the criteria to identify chiasms compiled by Lund and others are impressionistic generalizations. “Most of

the schemes are overly complex, with duplicated or restated criteria,” they said, adding that a consensus is vital if aficionados are to use chiasms to make theological conclusions or suggest how a text was edited.

To wit, in one of Paul’s letters, six verses warning against marriage to unbelievers has been long suspected as an interpolation. William O. Walker Jr., an emeritus professor at Presbyterian-related Trinity University in San Antonio, has shown that 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 interrupts a tightly written chiasm from 6:11 to 7:3.

Looking at Luke 22:40-46, Bart Ehrman of North Carolina made a three-part argument to propose that verses 43 and 44 in which Jesus sweats blood at the Garden of Gethsemane were a scribe’s insertion. (The lines are already bracketed in the NRSV because of weak manuscript evidence.) For one thing, Ehrman said, the chiasmus “is destroyed” by the two verses. But he also wrote that “despite the exorbitant claims of some scholars, [chiasmus] is a relatively rare phenomenon within the pages of the New Testament.”

The Gospel of John’s concluding 21st chapter is considered an addendum because the book appears to end at 20:31. But Peter Ellis, the former Fordham scholar, two decades ago proposed a Gospel-length chiasm for John wherein the 21st chapter is linked chiastically to most of John’s first chapter after the prologue. John Breck enthusiastically supported Ellis’s claims. But Breck also cautioned that he was not denying that the final writer-editor drew upon sources. In fact, Breck wrote that five sayings about the Advocate/Comforter/Spirit in John interrupt chiastic patterns in Jesus’ farewell discourse. If they existed independently in pre-Gospel tradition, Breck said, the evangelist probably inserted them “in order to address the crisis occasioned by Jesus’ delayed return.”

A former professor at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary, Breck now divides his time between Paris and South Carolina. A priest in the Orthodox Church in America, he is also a Beliefnet.com columnist. Granting that chiasms probably originated as mnemonic devices, Breck believes they grew into a sublime literary form, only to become—given the modern neglect of the form—“hidden treasures of the scriptures.”

“There may be no more effective way to promote an ongoing renewal in biblical studies today,” he said, “than to teach and encourage the laypeople of our various confessions to read scripture according to the same principles by which it was composed.”