

Chiasmus in the New Testament

Explanation

Chiasmus and several varieties of inverted parallel structures are found in many places in the New Testament. In reading Bible commentaries, students will often encounter figures displaying chiastic patterns. The following charts offer a few samples of such literary arrangements. Chart 15-18 lays out the elegant configuration of the Hymn to Charity (*Agape*) found in 1 Corinthians 13; Paul may have imported or modified this poetical unit from some other source. Chart 15-19 helps a reader to follow the logic of the Epistle to the Galatians, focusing especially on the central chiasm in Galatians 4:1–7. Chart 15-20 gives an overview of the letter of Paul to Philemon. The argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews also has a central pivot point, drawing attention to Jesus Christ as the new High Priest. These and many other examples show that Paul and other writers of the New Testament were skilled writers, conversant with the literary styles of their day.

References

- John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinley, *Chiasmus Bibliography* (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1999), 116–45.
- Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942).
- John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the New Testament,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, Germany: Gerstenberg, 1981), 211–49.
- On chiasmus in 1 Corinthians, see Lund, 176; Welch, 215–16; in Galatians, see Welch, 214; in Philemon see, Thomas Boys, *Tactica Sacra* (London: Hamilton, 1824), 65–67; Lund, 219; Welch, 225–26; in Hebrews, see Welch, 220.

Chiastic Hymn to Charity

1Cor 12:31–14:1

- A** Seek after the *greatest* gifts, and indeed here is the *greatest* way:
- B** If I speak in *tongues* with men, yea even with angels
But have not love
I am but raucous bronze and rattling cymbals.
If I have the gift of *prophecy* and know *mysteries* all and all knowledge
But have not love
I am nothing.
If I give away all I have or lay down my body to get glory
But have not love
I have gotten absolutely nothing.
- C** Love is *patient* toward others
Mercifully kind is love.
- D** Not greedy
Not a show-off
Not conceited
Not shameless
Not with ulterior design, selfishness or cliquishness
Not irritable
Does not rationalize wickedness
Has no joy when things are not right
But rejoices in truth.
- C'** Love is *patient* under all circumstances
Always believing
Always hoping
Love endures to the end.
- B'** Love will never lose its importance
But *prophecy* will come to an end
Speaking in *tongues* will cease
And some day knowing *mysteries* will be nothing special.
For now we just know little bits
And we prophesy of little glimpses
But when Christ comes all will be perfectly whole
And all our partial experiences will be no more.
When I was a child
I spoke as a child
I had the intellect of a child
I figured like a child
When I became a man
I had no more use for childish things.
For now we just see faint images of our real selves
But then we shall see face to face
Now we just know little bits
But then I shall know and be known completely.
What lasts are faith, hope, love, these three,
- A'** But the *greatest* of these is love.