

The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation

Ronald E. Man

[Ronald E. Man, Co-pastor, International Chapel of Vienna, Vienna, Austria]

Chiasm, also called chiasmus, may be defined as “a stylistic literary figure which consists of a series of two or more elements followed by a presentation of corresponding elements in reverse order.”¹ The individual elements may consist of single words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or even longer sections of material. One of the most familiar examples of chiasm is found in Matthew 7:6:

A Do not give what is holy to dogs,
 B and do not throw your pearls before swine,
 B' lest they trample them under their feet,
A' and turn and tear you to pieces.²

By recognizing this chiastic structure one can make much better sense of this verse than might otherwise be done; for it seems most logical that the dogs (*A*) tear to pieces (*A'*), and the swine (*B*) do the trampling (*B'*).³ Other examples of chiastic structures will be given later in this article.⁴

Talbert has shown that chiasm, as a particular literary expression of symmetrical design, was common in Semitic cultures (as well as in ancient Greek and Latin literature).⁵ The use of chiasm infused the thought-and speech-patterns of the Semitic mind, and in this manner it found its way into the Old Testament and then into the New Testament.⁶

Until this century chiasm was not widely recognized as an important structural device in biblical literature, though a few

scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries addressed this issue.⁷ In 1942 Nils Wilhelm Lund wrote *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, an epoch-making work in the study of New Testament chiasm. For the first time a major, systematic treatment of the subject was undertaken. Lund also contributed several articles on the subject as well.⁸ In 1958 Jeremias published a significant article on Pauline chiasm.⁹

Since these seminal studies the study of New Testament chiasm has blossomed, until today recognition of chiastic structures is common in full-scale commentaries and other scholarly works.

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