

Chiasms: the Hebrew X-factor

Hebrew poetry is a rhythmic interplay of ideas that adds depth and meaning through the structure of sentences. One common method used was a literary device called a chiasm, which is based on the Greek letter X (chi) describing the x-shaped literary structure. The ideas of this structure take the following sequential form A-B-C-X-C-B-A. Analogous to inverted parallelism, a chiasm draws attention to and emphasizes the center idea where the inflection or turning point has occurred. The whole structure acts like a frame to prepare the reader for the most important message.

1. Examine Jonah 1:3. Rewrite the verse in a manner to reveal the chiasm in word order. Notice how different translations can affect your ability to locate subtle literary devices (NASB vs. NIV). Because of the translation method, modern Bible translations may not attempt to translate the nuances that carry the subtle literary devices over.

to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD
down
to Tarshish
down
to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD

Instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah proceeds in the opposite direction! This was the emphasis of this chiasm.

2. There is another chiasm immediately following in Jonah 1:4-2:10. Do you see it? Hint: look for the ideas / concepts. What does the chiasm reveal?

The sailors became afraid.

Every man cried to his god.

They tried to save the ship (they threw the cargo).

The captain calls Jonah for help (the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.").

The sailors seek a solution (Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.").

The sailors question Jonah (they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?").

Jonah confesses (He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.").

The sailors question Jonah (they said to him, "How could you do this?").

The sailors seek a solution (they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?").

Jonah answers the call for help (He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.").

They tried to save Jonah (the men rowed).

They called on the LORD.

The men feared the LORD greatly.

The chiasm focuses on the identity of Jonah! Jonah, who feared the LORD God, yet rebelled against Him?! The paradox was that the Gentiles, who didn't know God, feared God!

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3. Study Jonah 3 and 4. What is the cultural context of this passage? What did Jonah know about God and how does the chiasm affect your understanding of the passage? How did God feel towards the Ninevites?

The Ninevites were cruel and ruthless enemies of the Jews, and Jonah wanted to see this large city (“Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk”) entirely destroyed. But Jonah knew of God’s love and grace and feared that He would forgive them.

Through the chiasm, the Jonah emphasizes his determination to “go to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD” and focuses on his refusal to go to Nineveh by highlighting “to Tarshish.” So desirous of their destruction that Jonah chose to disobey God by removing himself as far away as quickly possible. Nineveh must not have a chance to repent and, least of all, have Jonah himself be used to save them!

From a human perspective, one could understand Jonah’s anger towards his enemies the Ninevites; however, God revealed a different perspective of them. God describes the Ninevites as people “who do not know the difference between their right and left hand,” which is a Hebrew term describing children. God saw them as children who needed guidance! And with that conclusion, God shows that, through the experience with the shade plant and worm, Jonah had only thought selfishly of himself and hadn’t fully realized God’s compassion for both Jews and Gentiles who were His children and creation.

Despite being a prophet of God, one who clearly and intimately knew Him, Jonah was willing to die for his anger and vengeful attitude towards Nineveh; it was easier to hate instead of love. Jonah was an illuminating juxtaposition of human nature against a Divine nature. Jonah wanted to turn to anger, God wanted to turn from anger; Jonah wanted to condemn and execute, God wanted to forgive and let live. So much is revealed in God’s question to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”

While today’s form of communication is increasingly moving away from literal towards more visual and pictorial forms, it is incumbent for accurate Bible study to have a sense of the literary styles and devices of Hebrew and Greek. The vulnerability is whether your language skills will limit your understanding of Scripture and influence what translation you will select for Bible study. The above is an example of how the subtleties of language can influence your observation, interpretation, and application of Scripture.

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