

Chiastic Structure

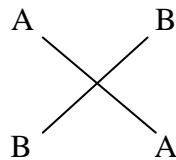
Chiastic structure (also called **chiastic pattern** or **ring structure**) is a literary structure used in the Torah, the Bible, as well as in other works. Concepts or ideas are placed in a special symmetric order or pattern in a chiastic structure to emphasize them.

For example, suppose that the first topic in a text is labeled by A, the second topic is labeled by B and the third topic is labeled by C. If the topics in the text appear in the order ABC...CBA so that the first concept that comes up is also the last, the second is the second to last, and so on, the text is said to have a chiastic structure. Also, a chiastic structure can also be of the form ABBAABB...ABBA.

Chiastic structures are sometimes called palistrophes,^[1] chiasms, symmetric structures, ring structures, or concentric structures.

Why Chi?

Chi is a Greek letter that is shaped like an X. Chi is made up of two lines crossing each other, so the line that starts leftmost on top comes down and is rightmost on the bottom, and vice versa. If one thinks of the lines as concepts, one sees that concept A, which comes first, is also last, and concept B, which comes after A, comes before A. If one adds in more lines representing other concepts, one gets a chiastic structure with more concepts.



When read left to right, up to down, the first topic (A) is reiterated as the last, and the middle concept (B) appears twice in succession (Also, the middle concept could appear just once)

The ABC...CBA chiastic structure

Leland Ryken points out that Milton's Paradise Lost^[2] has an ABC...CBA chiastic structure:

- A Satan's sinful actions (Books 1-3)
- B Entry into Paradise (Book 4)
- C War in heaven (destruction) (Books 5-6)
- C' Creation of the world (Books 7-8)
- B' Loss of paradise (Book 9)
- A' Humankind's sinful actions (Books 10-12)

The ABC...CBA chiastic structure is also used in many places in the Torah. This kind of chiastic structure is used to give emphasis to the inmost concept, i.e., C, the concept that appears either twice in succession or only appears once. Also, it shows that the other ideas are all leading up to the middle idea or concept.

A notable example is the chiastic structure running from the middle of the Book of Exodus through the end of the Book of Leviticus. The structure begins with the covenant made between God and the Jewish People at Mount Sinai, as described in the Torah, and ends with the Admonition from God to the Jews if they will not follow his laws, which is also a sort of covenant. The main ideas are in the middle of Leviticus, from chapter 11 through chapter 20. Those chapters deal with the holiness in the Tabernacle and the holiness of the Jewish homeland in general. The chiastic structure points the reader to the central idea, that of the expected holiness of the Jews in what they do. The idea behind the structure is that if the Jews keep the covenant and all the laws around the central concept, they will be rewarded with a sense of holiness in their Tabernacle and in their land in general.

The ABBAABB...ABBA chiastic structure

The ABBAABB...ABBA chiastic structure is used to contrast concepts A and B, which are usually closely related, but very different. First, concept A is mentioned once. Then B twice, A twice, ... until the structure ends with a final A. The format points the contrast between the two ideas, and the idea of something deeper.

An example of this chiastic structure is found in the beginning of chapter 4 of the Book of Genesis, when the two sons of Adam, Cain and Abel, are contrasted. The Torah describes their names, their occupations, and their offerings. The Torah mentions Cain first, then Abel twice, then Cain twice, and so on. The structure draws attention to the differences between Cain and Abel, pointing out the essential difference in their personalities.

Chiasmus as a mnemonic tool

Cedric Whitman in his study of the Iliad and the Odyssey exposed a chiastic structure "of the most amazing virtuosity" that simultaneously performed both aesthetic and mnemonic functions, permitting the oral poet to easily recall the basic formulae of the composition during performances.^[3]

See also

[Antimetabole](#)

[Chiasmus](#)

Further reading

The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi, David A. Dorsey, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1999

[*Review of The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi*](#), The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Terrence A. Clarke, Sep 2001

The Elusive Covenant: A Structural-Semiotic Reading of Genesis, Terry J. Prewitt, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990

The Beast that Crouches at the Door, Rabbi David Fohrman, Devora Publishing, 2007

References

1. The term "palistrophe" was coined by writer Sean E. McEvenue in his book, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*, Biblical Institute Press, Rome, 1971 ([review of *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* by Sean E. McEvenue, Author\(s\) of Review: George W. Coates, Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 91, No. 3 \(Sep., 1972\), pp. 395-397](#))
2. [*The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*](#), edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Randall C. Gleason, InterVarsity Press, October 2004, [ISBN 0830827943](#)
3. Cedric M. Whitman. *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiastic_structure