Learning to Use Literary Structure in Bible Study

During the past three decades or so, Bible scholars have been steadily advancing their discoveries that many Bible passages are structured in parallel patterns that encourage insights based on comparison or contrast. They have also discovered that these parallel patterns help identify points of emphases in the passage. In order to read biblical literature with thorough understanding, we need to know something of this Ancient Near Eastern writing pattern, and to understand how this pattern differs from our own typical patterns.

Let's start with our own modern patterns.

How Modern People Have Been Taught to Write

Modern people have been interested in evidence and logical reasoning. The modern writing style may be summarized as follows:

1. Introduce people to what we are going to tell them.
2. In an orderly manner, lay out the points that drive us to the conclusion.
3. State the conclusion.

The writing pattern is **linear**. It goes along a straight path from beginning to end.

Note: In contrast to modernism, post-modernism is less interested in evidence and logic. If post-modernism prevails long enough, it will be interesting to see what new writing structures predominate.

Silly Example 1 (Modern Linear Writing)

Introduction: I intend to show that the domestic cat can help end plagues.

- Plagues are carried by rat fleas.
- Where rats flourish, their fleas flourish.
- Cats can help reduce rat populations, thereby reducing the rat fleas and the plague that the rat fleas carry.

Conclusion: Therefore, I have shown that cats can help end plagues.

Other Linear Writing

Of course, there is some linear writing in the Bible as well as in modern times. Even if one is not interested in logic and proof, a linear pattern, moving sequentially from beginning to end, is still the simplest way to impart information. It may be the best

pattern for describing events in which sequence is the vital factor. It may also be best for describing regulations, rituals, etc.

Silly Example 2 (Sequential Linear Writing)

1. A great plague broke out in the land.
2. Many people were suffering and dying.
3. Our hero began importing cats to eat the rats.
4. After enough cats were imported, the plague ended.
5. The people held a big celebration.

How Ancient Near Eastern Writers Were Taught to Write

Ancient writers were not very interested in proving points.

They were more interested in comparing and contrasting things in order to gain insight.

Points for comparison and contrast were often emphasized by repetition in parallel structures.

Direct Parallel

In direct parallels, the point of emphasis often comes at the end of the chain (**D1** and **D2** in the example below).

Silly Example 3 (Direct Parallel)

A1. The cats

   B1. ate

      C1. the rats,

         D1. thus ending the plague.

A2. The felines

   B2. consumed

      C2. the rodents,

         D2. and the people rejoiced.

Symmetric Parallel

Just so you will know when reading various Bible scholars, a symmetric parallel may also be described by the terms such as chiasm, chiasmus, palistrophe, epanodos, inverse parallel, extended introversion, envelope construction, and concentric pattern. A rose by many other names can be confusing. *Symmetric parallel* seems most descriptive, using words that are part of our everyday vocabulary, and hence more open for use by non-specialists.

In symmetric parallels, the primary point of emphasis often comes at the center (**D1** and **D2** in the example below).

A secondary point often comes at the beginning and end.

Silly Example 4

The point of emphasis in Silly Example 4 is the same as in Silly Example 3 (**D1, D2**). But the points have been brought together at the center so that it is immediately apparent that the deliverance from the plague (**D1**) led to celebration (**D2**). This symmetric parallel heads directly into the story (**A1, B1, C1**) and then backs out of it emphasizing the cause for celebration (**C2, B2, A2**).

A1. The cats

    B1. ate

        C1. the rats,

            D1. thus ending the plague.

            D2. The people rejoiced that

        C2. the rodents

    B2. were consumed by

A2. the felines.

Silly Example 5

A more subtle form of symmetric parallel looks much like the linear narrative of Silly Example 2. The difference is that the narrative now emphasizes the turning point of importing cats (**C**). The emphasis is accomplished by the paired contrasts of the increasing and receding plague (**B1, B2**) and the sorrowful and joyous responses (**A1, A2**). This example is simultaneously linear and symmetrical.

A1. Deep **sorrow** was in the land.

B1. A great **plague** with its immense **suffering** and countless **deaths** was **increasing by the day**.

        C. Our hero began **importing cats** to eat the rats.

B2. After enough cats were imported, the **plague** with its **suffering** and **deaths** was **receding by the day**.

A2. The people held a **joyful** celebration.

Examples of Parallel Patterns in the Bible

Both direct parallel and symmetric parallel patterns can occur on any scale from within a single sentence to extending over a whole book or group of books. For instance, I believe that there is:

- a mid-scale direct parallel (with an introduction and an extension added) in Genesis 1:1—2:3.
- a small-scale symmetric parallel in Genesis 2:4.
- a mid-scale symmetric parallel in Genesis 2:4—3:24.
- a large-scale symmetric parallel covering the entirety of the first Five Books.

Genesis 1:1—2:3 Mid-Scale Direct Parallel Plus Extension

Contrary to the usual direct parallel which locates primary emphases in section endings, I believe that, in the example below, the section endings (**C1** and **C2**) culminating in human creation in the image of God contain the *secondary* emphasis, while the A-level extension (**A3**) puts the *primary* emphasis on the divine foundation for the Sabbath. **A1**, **A2**, and **A3** all focus on *time*.

Introduction: Creation of Heavens and Earth (1:1-2)

A1. Day 1: Creation of Time (Ordering of Day and Night) (1:3-5)

    B1. Day 2: Ordering of Waters Makes Room for Air (1:6-8)

        C1. Day 3:

            a. Ordering of Waters Makes Room for Land (1:9-10)

            b. Bringing Forth of Vegetation (1:11-13)

A2. Day 4: Filling of Heavens with Lights and Regulating of Times and Seasons (1:14-19)

B2. Day 5: Filling of Waters and Air with Living Creatures (1:20-23)

    C2. Day 6:

        a. Filling of Land with Living Creatures (1:24-25)

        b. Creation of Human Beings to Rule Over Vegetation and Creatures (1:26-31)

A3. Day 7: Sanctifying of Time (2:1-3)

Genesis 2:4 Small-Scale Symmetric Parallel

In whichever order--*heavens and earth* (**A1, B1**) or *earth and heavens* (**B2, A2**)--this combination simply means *everything*. The emphasis falls on God's sovereign activity (**C1, C2**). The structure leaves us free to consider whether *created* (**C1**) and *made* (**C2**) are synonymous or whether they bring out differing dimensions (*created* = brought into being; *made* = brought into order). Either is possible.

"This is what came from

A1. the **heavens**

    B1. and the **earth**

        C1. when they were **created**,

        C2. in the day that the Lord God **made**

    B2. the **earth**

A2. and the **heavens**."

Genesis 2:4-3:24 Mid-Scale Symmetric Parallel

The turning point of this narrative is when human beings sin and when God confronts the sin. Important elements of God's plan for creation then start operating in reverse.

A1 Creation of **Man** and the Establishing of **Sacred Space** (2:4-17)

    B1 Creation of **Woman** and the Establishing of Human **Community** (2:18-25)

        C1 Serpent Tempts Woman (3:1-5)

            D Sin and God's Confronting It (3:6-13)

> > **C2** Punishing of **Serpent** (3:14-15)

> **B2** Punishing of **Woman** and the Disrupting of **Community** Harmony (3:16)

A2 Punishing of **Man** and the Banishing of the Man and Woman from the **Sacred Space** (3:17-24)

Genesis 1:1—Deuteronomy 34:12 Large-Scale Symmetric Parallel

The central emphasis of the Five Books (Pentateuch) is the organizing of the sinful chosen people (Israel) for representing God's holiness (**D**). The key text is Exodus 19:4-6. But at the end of the Five Books (**A2**) the basic issue of how God can live with sinful humanity (**A1**) is still waiting (**A2**) for a more satisfactory solution.

A1. The **Problem**: How Can a Holy God Live with Sinful Humanity? (Genesis 1--11)

> **B1.** A **Chosen People** and a **Promised Land** (Genesis 12--50)

> > **C1.** From Egypt to Sinai: **Freed to Worship and Obey** (Exodus 1--18)

> > > **D.** At Sinai: **Organized for Holiness** (Exodus 19:1--Numbers 10:10)

> > **C2.** From Sinai to the Jordan River: **Hindered by Unbelief and Disobedience** (Numbers 10:11--25:17)

> **B2.** On the Edge of Partial, Temporary Fulfillment: The **Chosen People** Prepare to Enter the **Promised Land** (Numbers 26:1--Deuteronomy 31:29)

A2. The **Solution**: Awaiting a Prophet Like Moses (Deuteronomy 31:30--34:12)

Looking for More Examples

Many commentaries of the past three decades offer structural displays similar to the ones I have shown above. The conventions for displaying them will vary somewhat, and some scholars are still resistant to this method, but the general concept is spreading rapidly. The best single source for such displays is *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, David Dorsey, Baker Books, 1999. Although I often differ on the details from Dorsey's displays, he establishes beyond reasonable doubt the existence of such patterns in the Old Testament.

Are such patterns also in the New Testament? They are not so dominant, being somewhat diluted by competing literary patterns such as those of Greek rhetoric. Still, I find that the parallel structures often may be found in the New Testament writings, even working their way along in cooperation with Greek rhetorical conventions.

Below for example is a pattern that I find useful for studying **Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.** Critics will say that there is no evidence that Paul intended such a structure. I need not claim that he did intend it. I need only demonstrate that it is useful for understanding the flow of his thought. There is no reason that such structuring of thought cannot happen at the subconscious level. Indeed, there is no reason that the Holy Spirit could not inspire writing structures without the writer's awareness.

A1. 1:1-2 Opening greeting

    B1. 1:3-14 Spiritual blessing in Christ

        C1. 1:15-23 Christ's headship over all things for the church

            D1. 2:1-10 Made alive with Christ by grace, through faith, for good works

                E1. 2:11—3:13 The new reconciled humanity proclaims the mystery of the gospel

                    F1. 3:14-19 Filled with the fullness of God

                        G1. 3:20-21 Glory in the church

                        G2. 4:1-6 Unity in the church

                    F2. 4:7-16 The stature of the fullness of Christ

                E2. 4:17—5:2 The new self speaks the truth and walks in love

            D2. 5:3-17 Arise from the dead; walk as children of light

        C2. 5:18—6:9 Walking in mutual and ordered submission under Christ's headship

    B2. 6:10-20 Strength in the Lord

A2. 6:21-24 Closing greeting

The stated purpose of God (to unite all things in Christ, 1:10) and the stated purpose of our lives as believers (to live for the praise of the glory of God, 1:12) show up in the center of this structure in **G2** and **G1** respectively which is where the main point should show up in this kind of structure.

A1 1:1-2 and A2 6:21-22 Greetings. Paul begins the letter wishing grace and peace and ends wishing peace and grace. The opening deals with holiness and faithfulness. The ending deals with love and faithfulness.

B1 1:3-14 and B2 6:21-22 Spiritual blessing and strength in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is important to note that **B2**'s warfare in the heavenly places is resolved by the use of God's armor which consists of employing the gospel of Jesus Christ against the lies of the deceiver and his troops. Just as the spiritual blessings are *in Christ*, so the strength comes from standing firm *in the Lord*. I believe that the blessings and the armor refer to the same realities of our faith. 1:1 (in Christ Jesus) introduces a concept that in **B1** appears repeatedly. **B2** begins "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." Putting on the armor describes what it means to live "in Christ": the belt of truth (Jesus is the truth), the breastplate of righteousness (Jesus is our righteousness), the shoes of the gospel of peace (Jesus is our peace, 2:14), the shield of faith (in Jesus), the helmet of salvation (Jesus), and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (the inspired writings that first foretell and then forth-tell Jesus, plus the gospel about Jesus), praying in the Spirit (who is given through Jesus). Many of the armor words or synonyms appear in **B1** (truth, righteousness=holy and blameless, the gospel, peace=unite, faith=believe, salvation, Spirit). The unity of the church (1:9-10) is a message to the demonic spirits (3:6, 10), a message that they presumably seek to resist by promulgating divisive lies. The spiritual armor thwarts their lies.

C1 1:15-23 and C2 5:18—6:9 Christ as head In **C1**, Paul prays that the Father will enlighten the believers to understand the rich resources of their inheritance in Christ, who is seated above all demonic powers and is head over all things for the sake of the church. In **C2**, Spirit-filled life is defined by worshipful and grateful celebration combined with mutual submission (recognizing and calling forth the spiritual gifts in fellow members of the body of Christ). Under the heading of mutual submission, there is also official order, but all (those in authority and those under authority) are to carry out their roles under the headship of Christ and in his self-giving love, always seeking the best for the other. We might look at the Letter to Philemon, presumably written about the same time, to see how shared Christian faith can alter the way the social order is lived out within the faith community (as Paul seeks to persuade Philemon to treat his returned runaway slave Onesimus as a Christian brother). We might also want to ask how the social orders that Paul describes apply in different cultures (for instance, where slavery does not exist or where relationships among men and women are closer to equal). Whatever answer we give to that question, we *all* need to submit *self* to Christ's *self-giving love*.

D1 2:1-10 and D2 5:3-17 Moving from *dead in sin* to *alive in Christ*. In **D1** Paul describes the Christian gospel as it moves people who were dead in sin into being alive together with Christ by grace, through faith, for good works. **D2** deals with specific changes that are needed as they seek to overcome lust and covetousness (both forms of idolatry) and even the loose talking and joking associated with them;

they are to awake from their world-numbed moral drowsiness and arise from the dead, walking as children of light.

E1 2:11—3:13 and E2 4:7-16 New creatures in Christ. In **E1** Paul describes the social and cultural implications of our new life in Christ. He asserts that Christ is the peace between Jews and Gentiles, creating one new man (human beings who find their identity in Christ rather than in the cultures of their birth) in place of the two. Jews and Gentiles are fellow members of the household of God, living stones being built into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit. The mystery of the gospel has now been unveiled that Jews and Gentiles can be reconciled through Christ. Now the reconciling wisdom of God may be revealed through the church to the divisive demonic spirits. In **E2** Paul describes the moral and spiritual transformation involved in our newness in Christ. We are to take off the old self with its deceitful desires and to put on the new self created after the likeness of God. Honesty, patience, kindness, forgiveness, and disciplined speech are some of the qualities showing that we are imitating Christ and his self-giving love.

F1 3:14-19 and F2 4:7-16 Fullness. In **F1** Paul prays that believers may comprehend all the dimensions of the love of Christ so that they may be filled with all the fullness of God. In **F2** Paul talks about how the spiritual gifts function in the life of the church to equip leaders to serve in a variety of offices that in turn equip the rest of the church members to move into maturity in their faith and life. The maturity is measured by the stature of the fullness of Christ who is himself an expression of the fullness of God the Father.

G1 3:20-21 and G2 4:1-6 Glory and unity in the church. In **G1** Paul declares that God is able to do far more than we can imagine through the power at work within us, and that all glory in the church and in Christ belongs to God. In **G2** Paul urges his audience to live in humility, in love, and "in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He affirms seven essentials on which there is only one way for Christians, and any departure from these essentials is a creating of disunity. There is one God (the Father), one Lord (Jesus), one Spirit (the Holy Spirit), one faith (in the gospel of Jesus Christ), one hope (of eternal life), one baptism (into Christ's death and resurrection), and one body (the church).

Conclusion

This article is intended to send you on a further journey of discovering the riches of God's Word. *Bon voyage!*