Paul’s epistles are generally among the clearest of the NT writings to outline. After struggling to identify the principles which guided the gospel writers to arrange parallel pericopae in seemingly conflicting sequences, or after puzzling over the complex interplay of theology and ethics in Hebrews and most of the general epistles, the expositor breathes a sigh of relief when he comes to the letters of Paul. Romans divides neatly in two after chap. 11, with the previous chapters in turn subdividing relatively unambiguously according to the stages of God's plan of redemption for the world. First Corinthians reads like a checklist of controversial issues in Corinth, with chaps. 1-6 responding in order to items raised by the messengers from Chloe's household and chaps. 7-16 replying to questions in a written letter from the Corinthian church to Paul. Even the shorter epistles usually acknowledged as Pauline, with Philippians as a possible exception, generally fall into two or three main sections with discernible progressions of thought within each of these.¹

Second Corinthians, therefore, stands out all the more strikingly with its unparalleled lack of apparent structure and unity. The two sections which most commentators agree hang together as unified wholes, chaps. 10-13 and 2:14-7:4, follow so abruptly from the preceding material that they have regularly been regarded as entirely

separate letters interpolated into their present contexts. A third much shorter section, 6:14-7:1, seems intrusive even for many supporters of the unity of the rest of chaps. 1-9. On any scheme Paul seems preoccupied more with discussing his travel plans, his apostolic authority, and the Corinthians’ attitude toward him than with conveying any lofty theological truths.

The purpose of this paper is not to review all the various theories which have arisen to account for these phenomena, nor even to address the problems of the letter's structure beyond those of the first seven chapters. Rather it is to suggest what I believe is a new approach to the question of the outline of 1:12-7:16 and to point out the implications of such an outline for certain issues of interpretation and integrity. I will take for granted as largely uncontroversial the identification of the first eleven verses of the epistle as introductory salutation and thanksgiving, and I will follow the traditional consensus which sees chaps. 8 and 9 as a relatively discrete section on the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, despite some recent attempts to link earlier material more closely with it. The structure which I will propose for the intervening six-and-one-half chapters depends on an understanding of this section as an extended chiasmus.

I. Criteria for Detecting Extended Chiasmus

Not too many years ago chiastic or inverted parallelism was scarcely discussed in examinations of the outline of major sections of Scripture, being viewed simply as a poetic device for short Hebrew couplets. Today, parts of almost every book in Scripture have been outlined chiastically, with many of the proposals straining all bounds

2 For detailed, recent surveys of the various proposals, see V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB 32A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 29-54; R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthian* (Waco, TX; Word, 1986) xxxvii-lii.


4 Furnish (*II Corinthians*, 392) takes 7:4-16 as an introduction to chaps. 8-9 and as part of a larger section of appeals from 5:20-9:15. C. K. Barrett (*A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: Black, 1973] 51) makes 7:5-9:15 a major division entitled "Paul's plans for Corinth, and their working out in the future." On the other hand, H.-D. Betz (*2 Corinthians 8 and 9* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985]) epitomizes an important opposing tradition which finds the disjuncture between chaps. 7-8 so great as to assume that chap. 8 begins a new letter. Betz's case remains unproved, but it at least demonstrates the major caesura in Paul's outline at this point."
of credulity. In his *Il Chiasmo nella Bibbia*, A. di Marco has compiled a voluminous catalog of likely and unlikely hypotheses from modern scholarship through the mid-seventies. J. Welch's anthology, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, also offers a number of improbable proposals but nevertheless succeeds in demonstrating the widespread use of chiasmus in both prose and poetry, both *Hoch*- and *Kleinliteratur*, throughout the ancient Near East. Two observations emerge from di Marco's and Welch's works. First, chiasmus was used far more widely in the ancient world than it is today, so that it likely underlies numerous portions of Scripture where it has not usually been perceived. Second, because chiastic outlines have become so fashionable among biblical scholars, any new hypotheses should be subjected to a fairly rigid set of criteria before being accepted. Yet I know of no study which has mandated detailed criteria which hypotheses of extended chiasmus must meet in order to be credible. I propose the following nine criteria, therefore, as sufficiently restrictive to prevent one from imagining chiasmus where it was never intended:

1. There must be a problem in perceiving the structure of the text in question, which more conventional outlines fail to resolve. This criterion singlehandedly casts serious doubts over many recent proposals. If a more straightforward structure can adequately account for the textual data, recourse to less obvious arrangements of the material would seem, at the very least, to risk obscuring what was already clear.

2. There must be clear examples of parallelism between the two "halves" of the hypothesized chiasmus, to which commentators call attention even when they propose quite different outlines for the text overall. In other words, the chiasmus must be based on hard data in

---

7 D. Clark ("Criteria for Identifying Chiasm," *Linguistica Biblica* 35 [1975] 63-72) promises more than he delivers, suggesting merely that one look for a combination of parallels in form, content and language, and spends most of his time discussing only one example, that of J. Dewey on Mark 2:1-3:6.
the text which most readers note irrespective of their overall synthesis. Otherwise it is too simple to see what one wants to see and to impose on the text an alien structural grid.9

(3) Verbal (or grammatical) parallelism as well as conceptual (or structural) parallelism should characterize most if not all of the corresponding pairs of subdivisions. The repetitive nature of much biblical writing makes it very easy for general themes to recur in a variety of patterns.10

(4) The verbal parallelism should involve central or dominant imagery or terminology, not peripheral or trivial language. Ancient writers often employed key terms as catchwords to link passages together, although the material they considered central does not always match modern preconceptions of what is important.11

(5) Both verbal and conceptual parallelism should involve words and ideas not regularly found elsewhere within the proposed chiasmus. Most unpersuasive proposals fail to meet this criterion; while the pairings suggested may be plausible, a little ingenuity can demonstrate equally close parallelism between numerous other pairs of passages which do not support a chiastic whole.12

(6) Multiple sets of correspondences between passages opposite each other in the chiasmus as well as multiple members of the chiasmus itself are desirable. A simple ABA' or ABB' A' pattern is so common to so many different forms of rhetoric that it usually yields few startlingly profound insights.13 Three or four members repeated in inverse sequence may be more significant. Five or more elements

---


13 But see below n. 51.
paired in sequence usually resist explanations which invoke subcon- 
sscious or accidental processes.14

(7) The outline should divide the text at natural breaks which 
would be agreed upon even by those proposing very different struc-
tures to account for the whole. If a proposed chiasmus frequently 
violates the natural "paragraphing" of the text which would otherwise 
emerge, then the proposal becomes less probable.15

(8) The center of the chiasmus, which forms its climax, should be 
a passage worthy of that position in light of its theological or ethical 
significance. If its theme were in some way repeated in the first and 
last passages of the text, as is typical in chiasmus,16 the proposal 
would become that much more plausible.

(9) Finally, ruptures in the outline should be avoided if at all 
possible. Having to argue that one or more of the members of the 
reverse part of the structure have been shifted from their correspond-
ing locations in the forward sequence substantially weakens the hy-
pothesis; in postulating chiasmus, exceptions disprove the rule!17

These nine criteria are seldom fulfilled in toto even by well-
established chiastic structures, so it would seem these controls might 
actually be too rigid. But granted that some exceptions should be 
permitted, the more of these criteria which a given hypothesis fails to 
meet, the more sceptical a reception it deserves. Conversely, a hy-
pothesis which fulfills most or all of the nine stands a strong chance of 
reflecting the actual structure of the text in question. Considering a 
small spectrum of recent proposals not already mentioned in the notes 
above, and without defending each application in detail, I would thus

14 For one attempt to give precise statistical quantification to judgments of this 
type, see Y. T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in Welch, Chiasmus, 
50-117, esp. the appendix, 116-17.

15 Here is a major problem with P. F. Ellis, The Genius of John (Collegeville, MN: 
Liturgical, 1984). John 4:39-45 is not really detachable from 4:4-38 (or else vv 39-42 
should go with 4-38 and 43-45 with 46-52). Cf. also the unusual outline of R. Morgen-

16 On interpreting chiasmus in general, see the pioneering work of N. W. Lund, 
Chiasmus in the New Testament (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 
1942). More recently, but much more briefly, cf. J. Breck, "Biblical Chiasmus: Ex-

17 Thus calling into question, e.g., D. R. Miesner, "The Missionary Journeys 
recognizes that not all structures are perfect in form, but he does not distinguish between 
ruptures which do not call into question an overall outline and those which do. More 
nuanced is H. V. D. Parunek, "Oral Typesetting: Some Uses of Biblical Structure," Bib 62 
assess A. Culpepper's view of John 1:1-18 as highly likely;\(^{18}\) P. Davids' approach to the Epistle of James as quite plausible even though more complex than a simple inversion;\(^{19}\) K. Wolfe's analysis of Luke-Acts as attractive, though fairly general;\(^{20}\) H. J. B. Combrink's outline of Matthew as at least slightly more convincing than current alternatives;\(^{21}\) my own work on Luke's central section as at least no worse than the alternatives;\(^{22}\) A. Vanhoye's treatment of Hebrews as not terribly helpful;\(^{23}\) D. Deeks on the Fourth Gospel as much too vague and subtle;\(^{24}\) and J. Bligh on Galatians as painfully forced and hopelessly elaborate.\(^{25}\) These examples could be multiplied, with the less convincing ones outweighing the more convincing, but they provide a sufficient sample for comparison with the proposal for 2 Corinthians 1-7 put forward here.

II. The Outline of 2 Cor 1:12-7:16

The outline to be submitted to these nine criteria for evaluation is as follows:

\begin{align*}
A & \\
1:12-22--\text{the Corinthians can rightfully boast in Paul} & A' \\
7:13b-16--\text{Paul can rightfully boast in the Corinthians} \\
B & \\
1:23-2:11--\text{grief and comfort over the painful letter; hope for forgiving the offender} & B' \\
7:8-13a--\text{grief and comfort over forgiving the offender; joy after forgiving the offender}
\end{align*}


\(^{19}\) P.H. Davids, \textit{The Epistle of James} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 22-29. The principal criterion not met is (8).


\(^{21}\) H. J. B. Combrink, "The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as Narrative," \textit{Tyndale Bulletin} 34 (1983) 61-00. Criteria (3), (4), and (5) are all in doubt, but all the rest are met very nicely.

\(^{22}\) Blomberg, "Midrash." All nine criteria are met but the biggest problems revolve around the source-critical hypotheses required.


\(^{24}\) D. Deeks, "The Structure of the Fourth Gospel," \textit{NTS} 15 (1968) 107-29. Few of the proposed correspondences are close, and the resulting outline is an unlikely hybrid of synonymous and antithetical parallels.

\(^{25}\) J. Bligh, \textit{Galatians in Greek} (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1966). Bligh postulates as many as five overlapping levels of concentricity, with the vast majority of his correspondences being extremely vague.
It would seem that this outline satisfies all nine criteria remarkably well.

(1) The difficulty in following Paul's train of thought and the inadequacy of previous outlines is readily admitted by most commentators. Toward the beginning of the century, for example, A. Plummer wrote,

With regard to the letter itself it is better to talk of 'contents' rather than 'plan.' Beyond the three clearly marked divisions (i.-vii.; viii., ix.; x.-xiii.) there is not much evidence of plan. In these main divisions the Apostle seems to have dictated what he had to say just as his thoughts and feelings moved him, without much consideration of arrangement or logical sequence. 26

Due to the occasional nature of the epistles, there is nothing inherently implausible in this, except that Paul regularly seems rather more organized. A digression like Phil 3:2-4:7 might provide a partial

parallel for a section such as 2 Cor 6:14-7:1\textsuperscript{27} but hardly for one as substantial as 2:14-7:4. An outline which avoids such digressions, if a reasonable one can be found, would seem to be preferable. Yet a survey of current analyses which attempt to do more than simply label the paragraphs in sequence without any assessment of coordination and subordination\textsuperscript{28} regularly reveals the recourse to postulating major and minor digressions of various sorts. In addition to 2: 14- 7:4 and 6:14- 7:1,\textsuperscript{29} C. K. Barrett is forced to call 5:1-10 on the resurrection of the believer "a digression illustrating further the relative unimportance of the earthenware container,"\textsuperscript{30} V. Furnish admits that he views 1:18- 22 on Paul's integrity in his promises "a somewhat ponderous excur- sus,"\textsuperscript{31} and W. Schmithals finds a sufficient break after 6:2 to split 2:14- 7:4 into two separate letters at that point.\textsuperscript{32} Surely one ought to welcome proposals that would improve on these. R. Martin is on the right track when he labels 2:14-7:4 "the main theme" of the letter rather than a digression, but the shifts from one section to the next remain as abrupt as ever.\textsuperscript{33}

(2) As the outline indicates, there is no problem demonstrating conceptual parallelism between the forward and reverse sequences of the chiasmus. The objects of boasting vary from A to A', but the purpose of Paul's expressions of confidence remains the same in each case: to "state the view of the writer that he hopes his readers now have or will gain from the commendation."\textsuperscript{34} B and B' obviously


\textsuperscript{28} As e.g., in P. E. Hughes, Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961); J. Hering, La seconde epitre de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens (CNT 8; Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestle, 1958); H. Lietzmann, An die Korinther 1/11 (HNT 9; Tiibingen: 1969); R. H. Strachan, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935); J.-F. Collange, Enigmes de la deuxieme epitre de Paul aux Corinthiens (SNTS 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

\textsuperscript{29} Even those who argue for the unity of the epistle regularly refer to these sections as digressions. See e.g., M. J. Harris, "2 Corinthians," (EBC 10; ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 317; R. V. G. Tasker, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (London: Tyndale, 1958) 29-30; F. F. Bruce, 1 and 2 Corinthians (London: Oliphants, 1971) 214.

\textsuperscript{30} Barrett, Second Corinthians, 51.

\textsuperscript{31} Furnish, II Corinthians, 141. N. Hyldahf ("Die literarische Einheit des 2 Korintherbriefes," ZNW 64 [1973] 296) includes v. 17 as part of the digression.

\textsuperscript{32} W. Schmithals, "Die Korinthbriefe als Briefsammlung," ZNW 64 (1973) 288.

\textsuperscript{33} Martin, 2 Corinthians, xxxvii.

belong together in all attempts to understand the offending party at Corinth, as a glance at most any introduction to 2 Corinthians reveals. The similarity between 2:12-13 and 7:5-7 is the very reason why the intervening text has been labeled an interpolation or a digression. The catalogs of Christian hardships which are ultimately overcome in 4:7-12 and 6:3-10 are regularly compared as among the most poignant in all of Scripture.

The least obvious pair matches 2:14-4:6 with 6:11-7:4. Still, both of these sections linger long on the clear-cut contrasts between true Christianity and its opposition: false teachers in Corinth, improper responses by the Corinthians, and inappropriate application of the old covenant in the age of the new. More strikingly, both sections focus heavily on key OT Scriptures which bear on the situation in Corinth. J. McDonald has perceptively suggested that these two sections form the beginning and end of a midrashic homily, following Jewish convention of citing a catena of texts at the start and climax of various units of preaching material. Nevertheless, because Paul dwells repeatedly on so many themes close to his heart in this epistle—joy in the midst of suffering, the blessing and comfort of God, his apostolic authority and integrity, the appeal to the Corinthians to be reconciled to him, to each other, and to God—what will be needed to defend the detail of the proposed chiasmus is unique, verbal parallelism between the various paired sections.

(3) In fact close verbal parallels do exist, pairing each of the main sections of the outline with its counterpart. Paul's "boasting" in the Corinthians and his urging them "to boast" in him are linked by the repetition of καὐχησις, καὐχήμα, καὐχάωμαι, (1:12, 14; 7:14[2x]). The sections on Paul's painful letter and the repentant excommunicant are dominated by words for "grief"—λύπη/λυπέω (2:1, 2[2x], 3[2x], 4, 5[2x], 7; 7:8[2x], 9[3x], 10[2x], 11). 7:5-6 repeats the language of 2:13 very closely: ἐξῆλθον εἰς Μακεδονίαν ("I went away into Macedonia") becomes ἔλθοντων ἡμῶν εἰς Μακεδονίαν ("after we came to Macedonia"), οὐκ ἔσχατα ἀνεσίων τοῦ πνεύματι μου ("I had no rest in my

36 R. Holstad ("Eine Hellenistische Parallele zu 2. Kor. 6,3ff.,” ConNT 9 [1944] 22-27) and A. Friderichsen, ("Zum Thema 'Paulus und die Stoa': Eine stoische Stilparallele zu 2. Kor. 4,8ff.,” ConNT 9 [1944] 27-32) not only pointed out their similarity to each other but also to Hellenistic catalogues of suffering, esp. in Diogenes and Plutarch. The parallelism is made that much more obvious by the two articles’ appearing back-to-back in the same source!
spirit") is balanced nicely by οὐδεμίαν ἑσχατερὸν ἀνεσίν ἡ σάρξ ἡμῶν
("our flesh had no rest"), and μὴ εὕρεῖν με Τίτον ("my not finding Titus") corresponds to ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ Τίτου ("by the coming of Titus"). The fourth pair of passages is connected somewhat more loosely but the repetition of καρδία ("heart"--3:1, 3, 15; 4:6; 6:11; 7:3), παρρησία ("boldness"-3:12; 7:4), and θεός ζώντως ("living God"-3:13; 6:16) are all worth noting. More significantly, both 4:6 and 6:14 contrast "light" and "darkness" (φῶς, σκότος). Sections E and E' are linked most obviously by the catalogs of sufferings enumerated, but there is also verbal parallelism in the introductory combinations of θλιβόμενοι οὐ στενοχωρούμενοι ("being afflicted but not distressed"--4:8) and ἐν θλίψεσιν . . . ἐν στενοχωρίας ("in afflictions . . . in distresses--6:4).

(4) Only superficial familiarity with this epistle is required to recognize that the terminology identified as parallel in each case epitomizes central concerns of Paul rather than peripheral issues.38

(5) Not all of these terms and phrases are entirely unparalleled in 2 Cor 1:12-7:16, but overall their frequency in the sections paired as opposites is significant. Paul's only other boasting comes in 5:12 and 7:4, and the former verse, in which both verbal and nominal forms appear, falls in the center of the chiasmus, where one expects thoughts from the "extremes" to be reiterated. In light of his seventeen uses of this word group in chaps. 10-13, the relative infrequency of his "boasts" in these opening chapters makes those references which do occur that much more worthy of notice. The grief which dominates 1:23-2:11 and 7:8-13 never recurs elsewhere in chaps. 1-7, and only once in the rest of the entire epistle (9:7). The phrases linking 2:13 with 7:5-6 are wholly unparalleled. As for D and D', "heart" re-appears three times outside of the passages which are matched, but the specific expressions for "boldness" and "the living God" are unique. "Darkness" occurs nowhere else in 2 Corinthians; "light," only in 11:14. "Tribulations" and "distresses," which link E and E', occur elsewhere separately but never together, a fact all the more suggestive since Paul pairs στενοχωρία and θλίψεως in two of its other three NT occurrences (Rom 2:9; 8:35; diff. 2 Cor 12:101).

(6) The identification of five sections to each "half" of the chiasmus clearly satisfies the criterion of multiple correspondences. Additionally, each pair has several features or several occurrences of the same feature in common. In addition to the general headings and specific linguistic details already listed, the following observations

lend further credence to the outline at the point where most proposals fail—finding a plausible way to incorporate 6:14-7:1 into the larger context. To begin with, 6:11-13 and 7:2-4 form an oft-noted unity, so that if the intervening verses are not an interpolation, then 6:11-7:4 forms an aba' pattern itself. In both a and a' Paul pleads for the Corinthians to open or widen their hearts to accept his friendship and authority once again, reassuring them of his affection for them. He thus "cushions the blow" which 6:14-7:1 would inevitably land, with their stern injunctions to keep separate from all manner of evil. It is even likely that the partnership with unrighteousness which is apparently plaguing some in Corinth (6:14) is the very reason why they are restrained in their response to Paul (6:12). But if they recognize their status as God's children (6:18), and act morally as that status demands, then they will be able to accept Paul's relationship to them as a father to his spiritual children (6:13).

Not only does 6:14-7:1 thus have logical links with the verses which frame it, but it also contains an internal chiasmus. Paul has arranged his four OT citations in vv. 16-18 so that they begin and end with verbally parallel promises of God (ἐσωμαι αὐτῶν θεος καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐσονται μου λαός ["I will be their God and they will be my people"]/ ἐσομαι υμίν εἰς πατέρα καὶ υμεῖς ἐσεσθε μοι εἰς υἱοὺς καὶ θυγατέρας ["I will be father to you and you will be to me as sons and daughters"]). In between, he sandwiches two conceptually parallel imperatives: "come out from them and be separate" and "touch no unclean thing."

Interestingly, the passage opposite 6:11-7:4 also divides into a careful chiastic pattern—abcb'a'. In 2:14-16a and 4:3-6 Paul contrasts the two opposite fates of those who accept or reject the gospel—life vs. death and light vs. darkness. The passages 2:16b-3:3 and 4:1-2 both compare the integrity of Paul's ministry with the deceit of the false teachers. Paul needs no letters of "commendation" (3:1) because he "commends" himself to everyone's conscience (4:2). In between, 3:4-18 explores the relationship between old and new covenants, comparing the transient glory of the letter of the Law which kills with the permanent glory of the Spirit of Christ which gives life. Thus in

40 Plummer, Second Corinthians, xxv; Hughes, Second Corinthians, 244.
2:14-4:6, Paul proceeds from an appeal for the Corinthians to accept him because the Spirit of the living God written on their hearts is his letter of recommendation, to a sharp contrast between the life-giving Spirit and life-killing letter via exposition from the OT teaching on new and old covenants, to the theological indicative that they are being more and more conformed to Christ's likeness. Similarly, in 6:11-7:4, Paul begins with an appeal for the Corinthians to accept him into their hearts, moves on to a sharp contrast between Christ's bestowing righteousness and Belial's producing sin in the temple of the living God, and concludes with the ethical imperative of perfection in holiness. The similarity is sufficient to render unnecessary any recourse to misplaced letters or major digressions.

(7) Every division in the proposed chiasmus appears as a major or minor break in the Nestle-Aland Greek NT and is supported by various commentaries. Not all command the consensus that 2:13 and 7:4 do, but if they did then the problem of the outline would already have been solved! Much of the disagreement stems from the fact that Paul's logic contains regular transitional paragraphs which can easily be taken as either concluding a previous thought or beginning a new thought, unless an overarching structure makes it clear what must fit where.

(8) The center of the chiasmus certainly creates a fitting climax. Paul has already proclaimed to the Corinthians "Jesus Christ and him crucified" as the heart of his gospel (1 Cor 2:2). No more appropriate center for 2 Cor 1-7 could be found. Paul perseveres in his ministry because he is convinced that "Christ died for all" (5:14), offering a restored relationship between God and men (5:19), and enabling those who are "in Christ" to become new creations (5:17). Like ambassadors, they in turn proclaim the forgiveness of sins to others (5:20). Paul thus describes Jesus' ministry as one of reconciliation, a ministry which then becomes the mandate of the believer once he is reconciled to God (5:18-20). Verse 21 concludes this section with one of the strongest statements of the substitutionary atonement in all of

44 See e.g., Barrett (Second Corinthians, 51) for major breaks at 1:22; 2:13; 4:6; 5:10; and 5:21; Tasker (Second Corinthians, 30) for 2:11 and 6:10; and Harris ("2 Corinthians," 317) for 7:4., 13a, and 7:16.
45 In three instances, the correspondences I have pointed out often fall in the central parts of a given section as I have subdivided the text so that minor alterations in the "seams" would leave the chiastic structure unaffected. Thus 1:23-24 could be taken as the end of A, 1:15-22 as the start of B, or 6:1-2 as the end of F.
the NT: "for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."46

(9) There is no question of dislocation in the outline to ruin the symmetry and weaken the hypothesis. Each member of the first part of the chiasmus reappears in its proper place in the second.

III. Implications of This Structure

The significance of identifying a chiastic outline as the structural key to a given text in many ways differs little from that of any other type of outline; it better enables the expositor to follow the author's progression of thought and to emphasize the points which he emphasized and to subordinate those he subordinated.47 Additionally, however, certain unique features arise, three of which may be elaborated briefly.48

(1) The climax of a chiasmus is its center, as already stressed. Second Corinthians has often been viewed as one of Paul's less theological and more pastoral letters, primarily because the reply to his opponents in Corinth occupies so much of his attention. Certainly he spends a majority of his time dealing with his relationship with the Corinthians and those who are opposing him. But in any piece of writing, the main points are not necessarily those which appear most often but which recur in the most strategic or emphatic positions in the outline. This should cause one to think again about the significance of 5:11-21 for 2 Cor 1-7. It would seem that a strong case can be made for seeing these verses as containing the central point which Paul was trying to make. Yes, Paul earnestly desires the Corinthians to accept his authority and advice, but such acceptance can occur only as they recognize their sin and acknowledge the one who became sin to make them righteous. They must be transformed into new creatures in Christ on the basis of his cross-work and reconciled to one

46 Attempts to describe the NT's views on the death of Christ without employing this concept remain truncated. See esp. J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," Tyndale Bulletin 25 (1974) 3-45. On 5:21 in particular, Harris ("2 Corinthians," 354) offers these balanced comments: "it seems Paul's intent to say more than that Christ was made a sin-offering and yet less than that Christ became a sinner." Cf. M. Tolbert, "Theology and Ministry: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21," Faith and Mission 1 (1983) 63-70: "Jesus in his suffering and death plumbed the depths of the human situation of despair and alienation that results from the reign of sin."


48 In addition to the works cited in nn. 6 and 16 above, see R.E. Man, "The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation," BSac 141 (1984) 146-57.
another as the hallmark of their ongoing ministry. And Christ's crucifixion may not be separated from his resurrection. Paul's changed attitude toward others is based on no longer knowing Christ as merely human (5:16). Tellingly, each of these points seems to be precisely what Paul's opposition in Corinth denied. The passage 5:11-21 provides the theological basis which alone can make possible the practical and pastoral solution to these conflicts. Whether or not Martin is right in identifying "reconciliation" as the center of Pauline theology as a whole, the strategic location of this topic in 2 Corinthians makes it a strong candidate for the central theme of the major section of this letter.

(2) The second most significant parts of a chiasmus are its outer boundaries (A and A'), especially if their theme recurs in the center. In 1:12-7:16, this theme emerged as proper and improper boasting. The topic appears in the center of the chiasmus as well (5:11-12). The dominant role of boasting in chaps. 10-13 confirms its central function for Paul's relationship with the Corinthians and ties those chapters a little more closely together with the preceding nine. Furthermore, it places into perspective the specific problems with which Paul has to deal en route--the penitent sinner, the right attitude to the apostolic ministry, and victory in the midst of suffering. If the Corinthians are hurting themselves and distorting the gospel via an overly-realized eschatology leading to triumphalist ecclesiology, the opposite danger lurks not too far distant--an overemphasis on humility and suffering. Against both extremes 1:12 provides the proper antidote: "not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God," which alone enables the


Corinthians to receive Titus in the godly "fear and trembling" with which 7:15 concludes. "Boasting" as self-confidence is better than despair, but it must be directed to the Lord rather than oneself. Yet, as 5:11-13 elucidates, if one wants others to be proud of him in the way God would be, one may need to act in a manner which makes some think he is "out of his mind."

(3) The passages 6:14-7:1 and 2:14-7:4 need not be seen as separate letters, quotations of other writings, or even significantly digressive. The transitions between different parts of a chiasmus are often fairly abrupt, some more so than others. The roughest transition in the first half of 2 Cor 1-7, from 2:13-14, has been well explained by S. Hafemann. Paul's failure to find Titus during his travels reminds him of the triumphal procession of a Roman conqueror, leading his captives behind him to their deaths. Far from looking ahead to later victory, Paul imagines himself as a prisoner soon to die (cf. the sacrificial language in vv 15-16), but he is able to praise God anyway. Paul's discussion then proceeds by catchwords. The letters of recommendation call to mind the letter of the Law; the glory of the Law was represented by the glory on Moses' face, the veil which covered that glory contrasts with unveiled reading of Scripture by Christians, and so on. After the chiasmus of 2:14-4:6, Paul qualifies the victory believers have in Christ with the enumeration of sufferings which must precede their resurrection (4:7-5:10). But the reconciliation accomplished makes it all worthwhile (5:11-21).

The links between sections of the reverse sequence of the chiasmus prove more tenuous, and the paralleled sections prove noticeably shorter. But this is precisely what one should expect. Resumptive discussions need not dwell on detail already treated at length. And as the "second half" of a chiasmus unfolds, allusions to the corresponding passages in the "first half" will naturally make successive sections seem

54 As has usually been argued; see the survey of views in M. E. Thrall, "A Second Thanksgiving Period in II Corinthians," JSNT 16 (1982) 102-11. As a variant of this tradition, J. Murphy-O'Connor ("Paul and Macedonia: The Connection Between 2 Corinthians 2.13 and 2.14," JSNT 25 [1985] 99-103) argues that the positive associations Paul had with churches in Macedonia triggered this thanksgiving. Thrall herself argues that Paul introduces a second thanksgiving (112-24), but it is not clear why Paul would put it precisely at this point.
less apt in their immediate context and more reminiscent of earlier material. Thus Paul resumes the discussion of his travels in 7:5 not so much because he has finished an extended excursus but because he has reached the appropriate point in his outline at which to do so. A similar explanation undoubtedly accounts for at least part of the seeming irrelevance of 6:11-7:4 to its context as well; Paul is again reflecting on the OT concepts of glory and holiness to which he had devoted so much of chap. 3. Although his first quotation in 6:16 draws on Lev 26:11-12, while 3:7-18 has been termed a midrash on Exodus 34, the concepts involved are scarcely dissimilar. In terms of the historical narrative of the Pentateuch the situation is unaltered from the earlier passage to the later one: the Israelites remain encamped at Sinai, receive the Law, and await their marching orders. Certainly the concepts of living with Israel, being her God, and commanding them to separate from everything unclean encapsulate the most urgent parts of the message which God had to deliver through Moses when he returned from Mt. Sinai the second time, even if the actual quotations come from further on in the OT (2 Sam 7:14; Isa 52:11; and Ezek 20:34; 37:27).

IV. Objections Considered

I close by replying to three potential objections. First, is not an intricate, artistic device like chiasmus incompatible with Paul's having written 2 Corinthians as a deeply personal, emotional, and almost ad hoc reply to those in Corinth who would oppose him? This question reflects the earlier view of chiasmus which largely limited its use to meticulously structured works of poetry. But as already observed, recent studies have shown that chiasmus had thoroughly permeated the ancient Near East, and in fact some of the most difficult and elaborate examples reflect moving Sitze im Leben. Literary style, including


chiasmus, colored even such non-literary materials as Aramaic con-
tracts and Athenian inscriptions and thus is certainly compatible with
Paul's level of "occasional" writing. And Paul need not have had his
whole outline planned from the outset. He could well have reached the
end of chap. 5, knowing that he had left several topics unfinished along
the way, and then have chosen to elaborate them beginning with that
which he had treated most recently.

Second, if Paul has outlined these chapters chiastically, why has
he not used this device elsewhere for major sections of his epistles?
This objection overlooks the fact that 2 Cor 1-7 is unconventionally
structured vis-a-vis Paul's other writings regardless of what device
one utilizes to explain its structure; it applies with equal force to
outlines which resort to epistolary fragments and major digressions.
On the other hand, numerous smaller sections of Paul's letters un-
deniably do employ chiasmus. T. Shoemaker's recent analysis of
1 Cor 11:2-16 provides an excellent illustration. Moreover, at least
one complete letter, Philemon, seems to fall naturally into a sequence
of inverted parallelism. Remarkably, Philemon is the most occa-
sional and personal of all, of Paul's writings, so this would afford a
striking parallel to the chiastic outline of 2 Cor 1-7 if it were valid.
And in at least some instances it seems that Paul employs the simpler
ABA and ABB' A' forms to structure entire epistles.

Finally, if this is the true structure of 2 Cor 1-7, why has not
anyone ever noticed it before? Such a question, often resorted to
when all other debate reaches an impasse, misses the mark for at least
three reasons. First, it could equally be applied to many commen-
tators' outlines of these chapters since there is little agreement as to
why Paul is doing what he is doing. Second, as with most chiastic

Berg, The Book of Esther [Missoula,MT: Scholars Press, 1979] 106-13, or the Song of

59 B. Porten, "Structure and Chiasm in Aramaic Contracts and Letters," in Welch,
Chiasmus, 169-82; K. J. Dover, "The Colloquial Stratum in Classical Attic Prose,"
Classical Contributions (eds. G. S. Shrimp ton and D. J. McCargar; Locust Valley, NY:
J. J. Augustin, 198i) 15-25. I am indebted to Dr. S. Porter of Biola University, Los
Angeles, for this last reference.

Less uniformly persuasive are the various examples in Lund, Chiasmus, 139-225; Di
Marco, Chiasmo, 153-78; and J. W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the New Testament," in
Welch, Chiasmus, 213-90.

60-63.


63 In addition to the examples scattered among the sources listed in n. 60 above,
see esp. Ellis, Letters, passim.
outlines, most of the building blocks have been observed by different people at different times; what has been lacking was for someone to recognize the whole and construct a synthesis. Third, and most significantly, chiastic structures seldom appear unless one is looking for them. By that I do not mean that they are all the inventions of overly creative minds, imposing on the text a structure which was never intended, though many proposed chiasms have been just that. Rather I mean that what was almost universally accepted as an artistic rhetorical and literary device and useful mnemonic aid in the Mediterranean cultures of antiquity has largely fallen into disuse in the modern period so that commentators simply are not accustomed to considering it. Yet even today, it has not disappeared; in some cases one fails to see it because it is so natural. K. Bailey gives a delightful example of a conversation he overheard between two young men, who entirely without design asked each other four questions and then answered them in inverse order: (l)=(A) "Are you coming to the party?" (2)=(B) "Can I bring a friend?" (l)=(C) "Boy or girl?" (2)=(D) "What difference does it make?" (l)=(D') "It is a matter of balance." (2)=(C') "Girl" (l)=(B') "O.K." (2)=(A') "I'll be there." In Paul's case I suspect it was not nearly as subconscious but probably almost as natural.

---

64 See esp. ibid., 140-41; note also the links between 1:1-2:13 and 7:15-16 pointed out by Georgi (Gegner, 22-23); and the incipiently chiastic outline of Barrett (Second Corinthians, 51).
65 Bailey, Poet and Peasant, 50.
Read the Book of 2 Corinthians online. Use highlighting, underlining, and take notes while you study the bible. The structure of the letter relates primarily to Paul's impending third visit to Corinth. The letter falls naturally into three sections: Paul explains the reason for the changes in his itinerary (chs. 1 - 7). Author: 2 Corinthians 1:1 identifies the author of the Book of 2 Corinthians as the apostle Paul, possibly along with Timothy. Date of Writing: The Book of 2 Corinthians was very likely written approximately A.D. 55-57. Purpose of Writing: The church in Corinth began in AD 52 when Paul visited there on his second missionary journey. He stayed one and a half years, accomplishing much for the sake of the gospel. A record of this visit and the establishment of the church is found in Acts 18:1-18. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses his relief and joy that the Corinthians had r