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First-Rights

JAMES FROM THE INSIDE OUT

**If I called this *The Chiastic Structure of The Epistle of James*, no one would read it.
(In case you were wondering about the title)**

Several years ago, I decided to preach through the Book of James. Like any good student of the word, I began by making an outline. It didn't take long to get frustrated. He speaks of temptations, then switches to rich people, then talks of the tongue, only to bring up some more about the wealthy and temptation later on. While it seemed that many wise things were said, the structure was a hodge-podge. I felt like I was walking around in a fog. Then it dawned on me; James is a *chiasm*.

A BRIEF PRIMER ON *CHIASIMUS*

In English, we're used to two basic ways of argumentation (there are others). One is to state what you seek to prove at the beginning, and then present the evidence. The other is to first present the evidence, and then draw conclusions. A lot of the Bible follows these two patterns, and we find God's Word to be very understandable.

As the text of the Bible began to be studied syntactically a few hundred years ago, a third way of expression began to be noticed. It is not a modern way of expression; it is ancient. Academics call it *chiasimus*, and an individual example is a *chiasm* (pronounced "KEE-az-em"). It is named after the Greek letter *chi*. A capital *chi* looks like a capital "X," and scholars thought this best represented what a *chiasm* does.

Chiasms follow this form. The main lesson or theme is in the middle (called an "apogee"), and it's surrounded by parallel, symmetrical points. It forms a mirror image (hence the "X" pattern). Imagine traveling horizontally through a capital "X." You would go in from the left, hit the center, and then emerge out the right side in such a way as to correspond to your entry. It's easy to understand, but hard to explain! Maybe a couple of obvious Bible examples will help...

An unusual healing

In Mark 8, Jesus performs a miraculous healing that is different than all the rest. The account of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida goes from verses 22-26. At first glance, the healing does not go smoothly. After Jesus lays His hands on the blind man, He asks if the blind man can see anything. The blind man answered "I see people; they look like trees walking around." (8:24) As if He were making an adjustment, Jesus lays His hands on the blind man a second time, and finally the blind man can see clearly.

All other miracle healings in the Bible are not like this one. All the other miracle healings are complete on the very first try. God never needs a second chance. Whether He's working through a Prophet, or Apostle, or whomever, it always works. The same is true for Jesus. All of His healings only take one attempt. The fact that He has to try twice is very bothersome. It certainly sounds like He does not do a very good job, so He has to try again.

This question really did bother me. If Jesus was Who He claimed to be, why did this healing take two attempts? I thought and studied and finally put it into context, and then, like the Epistle of James, it dawned on me. This healing is part of a larger *chiasm*. Allow me to reword what happens here...upon initial contact with Jesus, the blind man can see, but not very well. But the more contact he has with Jesus, the better his sight becomes. Some contact with Jesus brings some sight; increased contact with Jesus brings increased sight.

If this was all we had to go on, I wouldn't blame you for being a little skeptical. It sounds good, since this is what happened to all of us in a spiritual sense. We know that it's true that the more contact we have with Jesus, the better we'll be able to "see." The problem is that it just doesn't seem like this is what the passage is saying.

Well, it doesn't sound like it, until you place this healing in the context of Chapter 8. To quote Wycliffe,

*"It shall greatly helpe ye to understande Scripture,
If thou mark
Not only what is spoken or wrytten,
But of whom,
And to whom,
With what words,
At what time
Where,
To what intent,
With what circumstances,*

*Considering what goeth before
And what followeth. "*

On either side of this healing are two incidents that take place between Jesus and His Apostles. The first happens in 8:14-21. Jesus is alone with His disciples, and He tries to teach them something from what happened just previously. He tells them to "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." Jesus was drawing on the earlier incidents of the feeding of the vast crowd with just a few loaves of bread (8:1-10), and the disbelief of the Pharisees (8:11-13). He was being poignant and deep. It was the perfect lesson for this particular, teachable moment.

But the Apostles totally miss His point. They think Jesus is talking about how they forgot to bring dinner with them (8:16). In His rebuke that follows, it's hard to tell whether He's more frustrated or amazed.

Here is how the *chiasm* is put together. The Apostles' condition in 8:14-21 is the same as the blind man's condition when he is first healed by Jesus in 8:22-24. They both can "see," but they cannot "see" clearly. The healing of the blind man is in two parts. A little contact with Jesus brings a little sight; then more contact with Jesus brings great sight.

Here is the key step. If this passage is a *chiasm*, then it is a mirror image. If it is a mirror image, then it must be balanced (that is, the same number of "things" on either side of the center), and it must be symmetrical (that is, each corresponding mirror image pair of "things" must somehow relate). To make this a *chiasm*, what happens next in the text must create a mirror image. The first three steps are: the Apostles cannot see clearly, then the blind man cannot see clearly, then the blind man can see clearly. If this is a *chiasm*, then the next thing that happens is for the Apostles to see clearly. This would be "step 4," that brings symmetry and balance. Is this the case? As you already suspect, the answer is yes.

In Mark 8:27-30, Jesus asks "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers for the rest, "Thou art the Christ." Just like with the blind man, the more they were with Jesus, the better their "sight" became.

Because we understand this passage is a *chiasm*, we also understand that while Jesus could have healed the blind man on the first try, He deliberately does it in two turns to teach this great truth. The more contact we have with Him, the better we will see.

The fall of man

In Genesis 3, the account of God confronting and passing judgment on Adam and Eve forms a

chiasm. First God speaks to Adam (3:9-12), then Eve (3:13a), and then Eve speaks of Satan (3:13b). (Adam - Eve - Satan) When God pronounces judgment, the order is reversed. First, He passes sentence on Satan (3:14-15), then Eve (3:16), and then Adam (3:17-18). (Satan - Eve - Adam) These form a mirror image. It is deliberately written this way.

Since this forms a *chiasm*, the idea is that the main point is in the middle, nestled within the supporting parts of the lesson. In this instance, the main point (apogee) is implied and not stated. It's a simple lesson though, where God is teaching that where there is sin, there is punishment. If you can see the balance and symmetry in these verses, then you're getting the hang of it.

The strange sounding parable

Another example is from the Sermon on The Mount. In Mt. 7:6, Jesus says "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls before pigs. If you do, they may trample them their feet, and then turn and tear you into pieces." (NIV) To American ears, there's something wrong here. Dogs tear and pigs trample, but that's not the way this verse sounds. It sounds like it's the dogs that trample and the pigs that tear. Americans are not used to *chiasimus*.

But to an Ancient Near-Easterner (like the Jewish audience here) this does sound right. A Jew would see that these words formed a familiar pattern. The message is that we must not mix God and sin. This reference to dogs and pigs present this teaching with a balanced, symmetrical moral allegory.

Chiasmus Diagrams

Chiasms are expressed in the form "A, B, C, C', B', A'." A is called "A," and A' is called "A prime". Obviously the number of letters used depends on the number of supporting items of evidence that are present in the argument. Again, there are two distinctives. The first concept is that A corresponds with A', and B corresponds with B' and so on. The other is that there is balance with the apogee as the center. The main lesson may be stated or unstated, but its place is in the middle. Mt. 7:6 would look like this...

A: Do not give what is sacred to dogs.
B: Do not throw pearls to pigs.
B': Or they may trample them underfoot,
A': And turn and tear you to pieces.

Gen. 3 would look like this...

A: God confronts Adam.

B: God confronts Eve.
C: Eve confesses that Satan tempted her.
C': God judges Satan.
B': God judges Eve.
A': God judges Adam.

Mark 8 would look like this...

A: The Apostles do not see clearly.
B: The blind man does not see clearly.
B': The blind man does see clearly.
A': The Apostles can see clearly.

Notice that when a *chiasm* is presented this way, it looks like the left side of a Capital *chi*. I'm not sure if this is where *chiasimus* gets its name, or if it's because a capital "X" is an obvious, graphical diagram of a mirror image.

Chiasms still occur today, even in English. For instance, typical phone conversations often follow a *chiastic* format...

"Hi Stan, this is Fred."

"How is your wife and family?"

"Gosh, wasn't church wonderful this morning? Isn't Mike Grooms a tremendous preacher?"

"Stan, the real reason I called was to ask if you could lend me \$50.00 until tomorrow?"

"You can? Thanks, you're a real pal."

"No, you don't have to drop by. I'll get it from you at church tonight. I'm really looking forward to another wonderful sermon from Mike Grooms."

"Tell your wife and kids that I said hello."

"Bye."

This is a very normal way to talk. Most people, especially when they're asking for a favor, just don't blurt it out in the first sentence. There are greetings and pleasantries to exchange first, then comes the real reason for talking, and then it's very normal to ease out the same way you eased in.

Fred's call looks like this...

A: Hi Stan, this is Fred.
B: How is your family?
C: Wasn't church good today?
D: Can you lend me \$50.00?
D': You can!
C': I'll get it from you at church.
B': Tell your family I said hello.
A': Goodbye.

Notice the symmetrical, balanced nature of this call. It's the middle that's the real reason for Fred calling Stan, and the other points neatly correspond to their counterparts. In our modern world, we may speak in *chiasms*. We don't really think with them though. The ancient people did. As I looked into the subject, I found that examples exist with Jewish, Greek, and Latin writings.

Chiasms vary in length. Some are only one verse, while others may span several chapters. In the Old Testament, for example, there are whole groups of Psalms that are *chiastically* arranged. Recognizing them where they exist can be a great aid in interpretation.

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES IS A *CHIASM*

Realizing that James is a *chiasm* helps to bring this letter into focus. It becomes plain that there is an intended wholeness, instead of a collection of wise sayings. Without the *chiasm*, all the different parts seem disjointed. With the *chiasm*, the parts form one picture.

I think it is obvious, though I haven't found too many who approach James from the same perspective. Here is how I think it goes...

- A: How to handle trials (1:2-27)
- B: Do not show favoritism (2:1-13)
- C: The tongue (2:14-3:12)
- D: True and false wisdom (3:13-18)
- C': The tongue (4:1-16)
- B': Do not show favoritism (5:1-6)
- A': How to handle trials (5:7-20)

As you can see, the apogee is about Godly and worldly wisdom. If James is a *chiasm*, then these verses that is its main theme. We find that James relates every other subject in his letter to the importance of wisdom. If you want to understand how he was thinking, you really do need to read it from the "inside out."

There's a fancy word theologians use... "pericope" (pronounced per-IH-ko-pee). It's roughly equivalent to "paragraph." Pericopes vary in length. Some are just a verse or two, while others are much longer. In First Corinthians, for example, Chapters 12-14 is the pericope about spiritual gifts, while 16:1-4 is the pericope about offerings. The Epistle of James covers four main subjects, and the subjects are separated into seven pericopes. They are not scattered; they are deliberately placed in such a way as to teach what James wants to teach. Everything hinges on the center of the *chiasm* (3:13-18), the

pericope about wisdom.

HOW TO TEACH AND PREACH THROUGH THE BOOK OF JAMES

The way most preachers and teachers present James is to start at the beginning and work through it chapter by chapter. It is a good way to study Scripture. The problem you run into with James, though, is that you repeatedly repeat yourself. You'll cover how to deal with sinful speech in Chapter Three, and again in Chapter Four. Trials and temptations are taught about in Chapter One, and again in Chapter Five. Following the text in this manner produces a redundancy that is hard to teach without sounding stale.

Perhaps a bigger problem with teaching James from beginning to end is that it is easy to miss the crucial concept. The driving theme behind everything else in the letter is what he teaches about Godly wisdom (3:13-18). Trials, favoritism, and the problem with the tongue all hinge on the apogee about choosing to think like God instead of the world.

Another common method is to teach James as if it were wisdom literature. Wisdom literature (*ala*, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) is recognized as writings filled with pithy sayings. James certainly has its share of these, and you could go from lesson to lesson teaching the verses that might end up as needlework or a refrigerator magnet.

The problem with this is that James is not wisdom literature. My whole contention is that James has a definite structure with a main theme that is supported by specific, concrete thoughts. It's legitimate to teach wisdom literature as wisdom literature. These works are significant and important areas within Scripture, but it isn't James.

Here are two better ways to present this epistle. One is from the "outside in." The other is from the "inside out."

The ideas behind this article actually came from a series of lessons through James that I led in Prishtina, Kosovo back in 2009. Our Wednesday Night Bible Study met in a friend's apartment, and I shared teaching duties with a scholar of some significant repute.

During this series, I approached James from the outside in. My introductory lesson was about *chiasmus* in general and about James in particular. By using familiar Bible examples, everyone caught

on. They were even enthusiastic to see how it worked in James! It was like a light was suddenly turned on. We spend a couple of weeks on trials and temptations (1:2-27, 5:7-20), a couple of weeks on favoritism (2:1-13, 5:1-6), a couple of weeks on holy and sinful use of speech, (2:14-3:12, 4:1-6), and then we studied wisdom (3:13-18).

In retrospect, there was one negative. Through every lesson, I kept emphasizing how each subject related directly to the central theme. Trials, the tongue, favoritism all connect to the idea of striving for Heavenly wisdom. It seemed to me that we spoke so much of wisdom in the prior weeks that the actual study of it was anti-climatic.

This is why I think it might be better, after the introductory lesson, to examine wisdom first, and then go on to the peripheral subjects. It is, after all, the way that James was thinking. He thought from the "inside out."

IT'S NICE WHEN THE FOG CLEARS

Just like you, the more I study Scripture the more I realize how I've just scratched the surface. Most of it is pretty clear, but some parts still mystify me. I think every honest Bible reader will admit some of God's truths are shrouded. By its very nature, Scripture reveals the mind of God. You can meditate and muse a lifetime and not get it all. But it is a wonderful feeling when, sometimes, the fog clears a little.