



Type: Book Chapter

Chiasmus Criteria in Review

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Source: *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*

Editor(s): Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT: BYU Studies; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon
Central, 2020

Page(s): 289–309

Abstract: Neal Rappleye’s “Chiasmus Criteria in Review” should become a standard resource for comparing and coalescing the main scholarly attempts to create standards or criteria for determining the chiasmic qualities and “merits”—what may be called the “chiasmaticity”—of any proposed chiasm. He conveniently charts and meticulously examines mainly the writings of ten scholars—Nils Lund (1942), David Clark (1975), Craig Blomberg (1989), Ian Thomson (1995), John Breck (1994), John Welch (1995), Mark Boda (1996), David Wright (2004), David Dorsey (1999), James Patrick (2016)—who have presented sets of criteria. Lund, for example submitted seven “laws governing chiasmic structures,” Clark introduced five “criteria types,” and Welch presented a list of fifteen criteria, which include objectivity, purpose, boundaries, density, mavericks, plus others. While no precise consensus exists regarding the conceptual formulation of such criteria, six most commonly agreed factors have emerged. Rappleye identifies them as: “1. Chiasms should conform to natural literary boundaries. 2. A climax or turning point should be found at the center. 3. Chiasms should display a relatively well-balanced symmetry. 4. The structure should be based on major keywords, phrases, or themes. 5. Chiasms should manifest little, if any, extraneous repetition or divergent materials. 6. The chiasmic order should typically not compete with other strong literary forms.”



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Chiasmus Criteria in Review

Neal Rappleye

Introduction

As in all academic fields, the discipline of chiastic studies has had to grapple with persistent questions related to method. Understanding how these questions have been dealt with in the past is critical in knowing how to proceed in the future. In that spirit, I offer a historical review of the criteria or standards scholars have used to judge the merits of chiastic proposals. Of course, space ensures this will be far from comprehensive, and I make no pretensions of being able to resolve the issues that have plagued the study of chiasmus for the last seventy-five years. In reviewing past efforts, however, I hope I can adequately identify the problems that persist and provide a fair assessment of where things presently stand. Finally, I will suggest some areas that might need further research going forward.

A Quick Criteria Review¹

Chiasmus, as the term is most commonly used today, “describes several types of inverted parallelisms, short or long, in which words first appear in one order and then in the opposite order.”² The earliest use of the term *chiasmus* to describe a literary phenomenon in the Bible appeared in 1742 in the Latin work *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* by D. Johannes Albrecht Bengel. As Bengel used the term, it referred to both alternating parallels (a-b-a-b), called “direct chiasmus” (*chiasmus directus*), and inverted parallels (a-b-b-a), called “indirect chiasmus” (*chiasmus inversus*).³ It would not be until 1820, when John Jebb published his book *Sacred*

Literature, that inverted parallelism was fully recognized as its own form of parallelism in the Old and New Testaments, although Jebb called it *epanodos* rather than *chiasmus*.⁴ Although a handful of other nineteenth-century writers also briefly discussed the use of inverted parallels in the Bible,⁵ it was not until two hundred years after Bengel first used the term *chiasmus* that a serious study of it in scripture was made.

In 1942, Nils Wilhelm Lund published *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, and with it came an early attempt “to describe the laws governing chiasmic structures.”⁶ Lund identified seven such “laws” in total (see table 1).⁷ Lund’s set of laws had a particular focus on the center of the chiasm, with laws 1–4 all dealing in some way with the function of the central elements. While Lund’s laws were a pioneering first step, today it is clear that they offer little help for the reader trying to identify new examples of chiasmus.⁸

Table 1: Lund’s Seven Laws of Chiasmus

1. The center of the system is always the turning point.
2. At the center there is often a change in the trend of thought (the law of the shift at the center).
3. Identical ideas often occur in the extremes and at the center of the system.
4. There are many instances of ideas occurring at the center of one system and recurring in the extremes of another corresponding system (the law of shift from center to the extremes).
5. There is a definite tendency of certain terms to gravitate toward certain positions within a given system (i.e., divine names in the psalms and quotations in the NT tend to be in the center).
6. Larger systems are frequently introduced and concluded by *frame-passages*.
7. There is frequently a mixture of chiasmic and alternating lines within one and the same system.

Another major study of chiasmus was Paul Gaechter’s 1965 monograph, *Literary Art in the Gospel of Matthew*,⁹ published in German, but this work advanced no formal criteria or laws for chiasmus. It would not be until the 1970s that the issue of criteria was taken up more directly. In 1973, Joanna Dewey published a paper arguing for a chiasmic structure in Mark 2:1–3:6 “using formal, linguistic, and content criteria.”¹⁰ Dewey, however, did not formally explicate her criteria, but in 1975 David J.

Clark made an effort to tease out the criteria Dewey used and reflected on their potential for wider application.¹¹ The “criteria” that emerge from Clark’s discussion actually form more of a typology of parallels that might be used in a chiasm (see table 2),¹² although he does provide some assessment of what makes stronger or weaker parallels within each type, such as his suggestion that in linguistic parallels, “Rarer words are more significant than commoner words.”¹³ Clark concluded that “no one type taken in isolation is adequate to establish chiasmic parallelism,” and ultimately, “with the chiasmic criteria as a whole, the impact is cumulative.”¹⁴

Table 2: Clark’s Criteria Types for Establishing Parallels in Chiasms

1. Content: themes within the passage
2. Form or Structure: type of narrative or dialogue within the passage
3. Language: the repetition of catchwords within the passage
4. Setting: the place or time of the passage
5. Theology: the theological significance of a passage

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a flourishing of chiasmic studies, with increasing awareness of questions about method and criteria. In 1980, R. Alan Culpepper suggested revisions on Clark’s criteria, eliminating the final two (setting and theology), because they are not always applicable, and replacing “form or structure” with “conceptual parallels.”¹⁵ The next year saw the publication of *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, an anthology on chiasmus in various literary traditions, edited by John W. Welch, with contributions from some of the giants in the field.¹⁶ In that volume, Wilfred Weston proposed four “controls” for evaluating lengthier examples of chiasmus,¹⁷ and in the preface, David Noel Freedman spoke ever so briefly of the need for chiasms to “satisfy . . . sets of criteria,” but ultimately noted, “A common fund of axioms and assumptions and a single sure-handed methodology are yet to be established.”¹⁸ A more detailed, but still relatively brief, discussion comes in the introduction, where the editor, Welch, noted, “A most important question arises over what criteria must be met before it becomes reasonable to speak of chiasmus . . . within a given text.”¹⁹ Welch suggested:

If any aspect of chiasmic analysis is to produce rigorous and verifiable results, the inverted parallel orders, which create the chiasms upon which that analysis is based, must be evidenced in the text itself and not

imposed upon the text by Procrustean design or artifice of the reader. Therefore, one's predominant concern is over objectivity. In striving for objectivity, it is reasonable to require significant repetitions to be readily apparent, and the overall system to be well balanced. The second half of the system should tend to repeat the first half of the system in a recognizably inverted order, and the juxtaposition of the two central sections should be marked and highly accentuated. Longer passages are more defensibly chiasmic where the same text also contains a fair amount of short chiasmus and other forms of parallelism as well. Key words, echoes, and balancing should be distinct and should serve defined purposes within the structure.²⁰

Nonetheless, Welch insisted "the objective criteria alone do not tell the whole story," and even went so far as to say, "where the objective criteria are less than perfect, it may still, in certain circumstances, be desirable to draw attention to ways in which the text tends toward inverted order, or to focus on a particular sense of balance or symmetry which seems foundational to the text itself."²¹ In Welch's view, chiasmus is a literary artform, and like any artistic expression, the ultimate merits of any given chiasm will remain imprecise and to some extent subjective.

Naturally, the 1980s also witnessed the continued practice and refinement of previous methods. For example, Gary Rendsburg's 1986 chiasmic analysis of the patriarchal narratives used a similar methodology as that used and discussed by Dewey and Clark, starting with overall structures that are broadly parallel thematically and then performing closer analysis to illustrate the existence of more detailed "parallel ideas, motifs, and story lines," as well as "theme-words which highlight the relationship between the two units."²² These different levels of analysis are reminiscent of the "formal, linguistic, and content criteria" of Dewey, and like Clark, Rendsburg agrees that it is "the cumulative weight of the data [which] permits us to conclude that we have here a deliberate attempt by an ancient Israelite genius to tighten the web he has woven."²³

By the end of the 1980s, Craig Blomberg published one of the most significant attempts at establishing criteria for identifying the presence of chiasmus. He was dismayed to find that "parts of almost every book in Scripture have been outlined chiasmically," and yet he knew of "no study which has mandated detailed criteria which hypotheses of extended chiasmus must meet in order to be credible."²⁴ So Blomberg advanced a set of 9 criteria which he argued were "sufficiently restrictive to prevent one from imagining chiasmus where it was never intended" (see table 3).²⁵

Table 3: Blomberg's Criteria for Detecting Extended Chiasmus

1. There must be a problem in perceiving the text with more conventional structures.
2. There must be clear parallelism between the two "halves."
3. Verbal and conceptual parallelism should characterize most of the corresponding pairs.
4. Verbal parallelism should involve central or dominant imagery or terminology, not trivial words.
5. Verbal and conceptual parallels should involve words/ideas not regularly found elsewhere within the chiasm.
6. The more correspondences between passages opposite each other, the stronger the proposal.
7. The chiasm should divide at natural breaks in the text.
8. The center is the climax, and should be a significant passage worthy of that position.
9. Ruptures in the chiasm should be avoided.

Unlike the previous efforts of Lund and Clark, Blomberg's criteria provided some clear measures that could be used in evaluating the merits of chiastic arrangements and thus marked a significant step forward. Yet Blomberg was careful to note:

These nine criteria are seldom fulfilled *in toto* even by well-established chiastic structures. . . . Granted that some exceptions should be permitted, the more of these criteria which a given hypothesis fails to meet, the more skeptical a reception it deserves. Conversely, a hypothesis which fulfills most or all of the nine stands a strong chance of reflecting the actual structure of the text in question.²⁶

As the 1990s rolled around, several additional studies in chiasmus and the literary structure of biblical texts more broadly were published. Mike Butterworth's *Structure and the Book of Zechariah* (1992), John Breck's *The Shape of Biblical Language* (1994), and Ian Thomson's *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters* (1995) each made important contributions to chiastic studies.²⁷ Both Butterworth and Thomson sought to establish more rigorous methods for identifying chiasmus. Butterworth did so by arguing for a systematic approach, which analyzed the text for breaks *before* structural considerations, gathered *all* repetitions, sifted them based on their importance, and weighed the conclusions of other scholars.²⁸

Thomson, on the other hand, attempted to revise and add to Lund's laws, rebranding them as "characteristics" and eliminating some and adding new ones in their place. He then further supplemented them with a list of "requirements and constraints" which every chiasm must meet (see table 4).²⁹ Yet Thomson admitted, "As more confidence is gained in the understanding of the nature of New Testament chiasmus, there may be a case for relaxing some of these constraints, since it is possible so to overemphasize them that a new kind of strait-jacket is created."³⁰

Table 4: Thomson's Characteristics, Requirements, and Constraints of Chiasmus

1. Characteristics

- a. Chiasms frequently exhibit a shift at, or near, the center.
- b. Chiasms are sometimes introduced or concluded by a frame passage.
- c. Passages which are chiastically patterned sometimes contain directly parallel elements.
- d. Identical ideas may occasionally occur in the extremes and at the center of a chiasm.
- e. Balancing elements are normally of the same approximate length.
- f. The center often contains the focus of the author's thought.

2. Requirements

- a. The chiasm will be present in the text as it stands, without unsupported textual emendation.
- b. The symmetrical elements will be present in precisely inverted order.
- c. The chiasm will begin and end at a reasonable point.

3. Constraints

- d. Chiasm by headings should be discouraged.
- e. Selective use of commonly occurring words is often a questionable procedure.
- f. Non-balancing elements, if present, must be very carefully accounted for.
- g. Exegetical evidence must be presented to support a chiasm's presence.

For Thomson, exegesis is the ultimate barometer for judging the merits of a chiasm. It is not enough for there to be a chiastic-looking pattern in the text—there must be meaning and purpose to that pattern. Hence, Thomson also laid out what he called a “two-step methodology” for identifying chiasms: (1) “identify a pattern which is potentially chiastic”; (2) “test the suggested pattern at the conceptual level by exegesis in order to validate the hypothesis.”³¹

John Breck also built on Lund’s laws but went in a considerably different direction. Reducing the seven laws to only four, Breck did not seek to create criteria that could be used to identify chiasms with mechanical certainty but rather sought to infuse chiasmus with even greater meaning. To Breck, chiasmus is “a rhetorical helix: a three-dimensional spiral that progresses with increasing intensity about a central axis or focus of meaning.”³² Thus, Breck trimmed Lund’s laws down to four (see table 5)³³ and rewrote what was left so that they would build on one another, culminating in the fourth law, which states: “The resultant concentric or spiral parallelism, with progressive intensification from the extremities inward, produces a helical movement that draws the reader/hearer toward the thematic center.”³⁴ In Breck’s mind, chiastic patterns should produce “a *helical* effect that on the one hand produces the forward or focusing movement from line to line and strophe to strophe, and on the other provides *meaning* to the passage by focusing upon . . . its thematic center.”³⁵

Table 5: Breck’s Four Laws of Chiasmus

1. Chiastic units are framed by inclusion.
2. The central element (or pair of elements) serves as the pivot and/or thematic focus of the entire unit.
3. A heightening effect occurs from the first parallel line or strophe to its prime complement.
4. The resultant concentric or spiral parallelism, with progressive intensification from the extremities inward, produces a helical movement that draws the reader/hearer toward the thematic center.

John Welch continued to more fully develop his criteria over time and in 1995 published a set of fifteen criteria (see table 6).³⁶ Still valuing the artistic aspect of chiastic writing, Welch sought to bring together both the objective and the subjective factors—including the beauty and

aesthetics (criterion 15) of an arrangement. “Most aesthetic forms of literature and art,” Welch reasoned, “do not lend themselves easily to formulaic definition or complete description, and the chiasmic form is no exception.”³⁷ Seeing a need for some flexibility in the analysis, Welch spoke of a “degree of chiasticity,” instead of absolute *is* or *is not* terms.³⁸ A text that meets many or most of the fifteen criteria would have a high degree of chiasticity, while one which meets few of the criteria would have a low degree of chiasticity.

Table 6: Welch’s Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating Chiasms

1. Objectivity: To what degree is the proposed pattern clearly evident?
2. Purpose: Is there an identifiable literary reason to employ chiasmus?
3. Boundaries: Does the chiasmus conform to the literary units of the text?
4. Competition with Other Forms: Are there other literary patterns present?
5. Length: How many keyword pairs are part of the pattern?
6. Density: How many words between the key terms in the pattern?
7. Dominance: Are the key terms the dominant terms in the passage?
8. Mavericks: Are the key terms repeated outside the pattern?
9. Reduplication: Is there frequent, extraneous repetition within the passage?
10. Centrality: Is the center the key turning point of the passage?
11. Balance: How evenly does the passage split from the central element?
12. Climax: Is the central element the focal climax of the passage?
13. Return: Do beginning and end combine to provide a sense of return?
14. Compatibility: Is it compatible with the author’s overall style?
15. Aesthetics: Is there a certain beauty and artistic quality?

Additional considerations came from those who are skeptical of chiasmic analysis, although they do not completely reject the existence of extended chiasms. In 1996, Mark J. Boda produced a list of errors often committed by those proposing chiasms.³⁹ David P. Wright expanded on

Boda's list of errors in 2004, dubbing violations "chiasmus fallacies."⁴⁰ These errors or fallacies are not criteria, per se, but they create a kind of reverse criteria by identifying what chiasms are not, at least in the view of Boda and Wright (see tables 7 and 8).⁴¹

Table 7: Boda's Errors in Rhetorical Analysis of Chiasmus

a. Errors in Symmetry

1. Lopsided Design: patterns are lopsided, with length of units varying from half a verse to several verses
2. Irregular Arrangement: irregular or nearly regular structures
3. Atypical Patterns: unique patterns that differ from common chiasmic patterns

b. Errors in Subjectivity

1. Arbitrary Omission and Inclusion: items are chosen in paired elements, but deemed insignificant when appearing elsewhere in the pattern
2. Questionable Demarcation: section and passage limits are set to fit the pattern
3. Arbitrary Labeling: items are labeled arbitrarily to fit into a chiasmic pattern
4. Metrical Maneuvering: delineation of the meter is susceptible to the individual reader
5. Methodological Isolation: alternative reasons for the pattern are ignored

c. Errors in Probability

1. Frequency Fallacy: alternative reasons for repetition of high frequency or technical terms are ignored.
2. Accidental Odds: gender, number of nouns, parts of speech, etc. often form patterns by accident
3. Metrical Consistency: evenness of line length increases the odds of having matches in meter on each side of the center, giving a false impression of chiasmic structuring

d. Errors in Purpose

1. Purposeless Structure: the structure has no purpose or effect
2. Presupposition That Center Is Important: falsely assuming that the center of the structure is the center of thought

Table 8: Wright's Chiasmus Fallacies**a. Errors in Symmetry**

1. Lopsided Design/Chiastic Imbalance: members are of unequal length, or paired elements vary in length from one another
2. Irregular Arrangement: partial chiasms, or inexact or convoluted designs

b. Errors in Subjectivity

1. Omission of Conflicting Evidence: ignoring comparable elements that do not fit the pattern
2. Arbitrary Labeling/Chiastic Harmonization: wording descriptions to establish pattern or hide inconsistencies
3. Ignoring Full Context: using only part of a text while ignoring the rest
4. Arbitrary Division (Chiastic Dissimilation): subdividing a passage that is coherent to provide a correlation with two paired members
5. Dissociation of Like Members: not pairing two elements that could be paired
6. Inconsistency of Pairing Criteria: associating different pairs on the basis of different similarities
7. Non-dominant or Common Elements: using ordinary words or ideas
8. Frequency Fallacy: using necessarily repeated technical terms or genre features
9. Atypical Patterns and Techniques: considering an untypical or unique pattern or element structurally significant
10. Questionable Demarcation: demarcating a chiastic structure that does not fit the range of a passage as determined by other methods
11. Methodological Isolation: ignoring other explanations that may exist for the ordering of material
12. Overlapping Chiastic or Other Literary Structures: proposing a chiastic structure where multiple conflicting or overlapping structures exist
13. Argument from Design: assuming that a structure must be intended

14. Metrical Maneuvering: adjusting metrical analysis to make the structure work
- c. Errors in Probability
 1. Accidental Odds: paired elements and larger chiasmic forms may exist by coincidence
 2. Metrical Consistency: coincidence in metrical similarity is possible, especially when line length is similar throughout the composition
 - d. Errors in Quantity and Scope
 1. Large Passage: the larger the passage, the greater the chance of finding coincidental chiasms
 2. Simple Structure: an undeveloped structure may occur by chance (for example, a-b-a')
 - e. Errors in Meaning and Purpose
 1. Purposeless Structure: not defining or finding a purpose or effect for the structure
 2. False Purpose and Meaning: attributing a skewed purpose or meaning; going beyond the plain meaning of the text

It seems important to note, however, that like many of those proposing criteria lists, Wright includes the caveat, “Obviously these observations cannot be used mechanically to prove or disprove the presence of chiasmus by their absence or presence. They have to be employed as guidelines for consideration in the study of any given passage.”⁴²

In 1999, David Dorsey published *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, which included a detailed introductory section, laying out step-by-step how he goes about identifying the structure of a passage.⁴³ While this process is not easily reduced to a simple list of criteria, as part of his larger discussion of methods he does produce a list of ten “guidelines” for identifying the structure of a passage (table 9).⁴⁴ These guidelines ultimately represent only one facet of Dorsey’s multi-step, multi-tiered approach. Dorsey’s method, however, is driven by a single, overriding concern: “Would people in the original audience . . . have perceived its arrangement as I have analyzed it? If the answer to this question is uncertain, the analysis should be reevaluated.”⁴⁵

Table 9: Dorsey's Guidelines for Analyzing the Arrangement of Textual Units

1. Objective Links: Identify (near) verbatim repetition of place, time, characters, genre, etc.
2. Prominent Links: Consider echoes established by features that are prominent in both units
3. Multiple Links: Spot links established by several different shared elements in both units
4. Unique Links: Associate echoes created by features that are unique to the two units
5. Easily Perceived Links: Recognize links that an ancient audience could have easily noticed or recognized
6. Author's Agenda: Identify links that further the author's agenda or intended message
7. Danger of Forcing Loose Ends: Resist the temptation to force loose ends into a perceived pattern
8. Danger of Rearranging Texts: Avoid patterns that require the text to be rearranged
9. Danger of Reductionism: Avoid reducing all units to the same pattern
10. Analyses of Other Scholars: Consider the analyses of others which differ from your own

A year later, Wayne Brouwer's *The Literary Development of John 13–17* paid careful attention to method, providing a review of past approaches to criteria and ultimately adopting Blomberg's criteria in his own analysis.⁴⁶

By the turn of the millennium, inattention to criteria and method in chiasmic analyses had become a far less common problem. Indeed, now, a new kind of problem emerged: the proliferation of varying sets of criteria. Every new graduate student who took up chiasmus in any way in their dissertation would spend some time working out some form of criteria.⁴⁷ Chapter 2 in Steven R. Scott's 2010 doctoral dissertation, for example, engaged in a probability analysis of chiasmic structures which yields seven proposed criteria.⁴⁸

In 2016, doctoral student James Patrick proposed seven criteria adapted from the intertextual studies of Richard Hays (see table 10).⁴⁹ There is a certain brilliance in this approach because chiasmus can be

seen as a type of intratextuality—that is, chiasmic patterns are ultimately about the internal relationships within the text. Further setting Patrick’s work apart is his effort to not only establish criteria themselves, but also to establish “stages of assessment,” wherein the *order* in which the criteria are applied is laid out.⁵⁰ He thus gives higher priority to specific criteria.

Table 10: Patrick’s Criteria for Establishing Intratextuality

1. Balance: The two episodes should be parallel with each other alone, at an equivalent position, and of similar length
2. Volume: There should be multiple parallels between the two episodes, both verbal and conceptual, with paralleled elements that do not feature regularly at other points
3. Weight: The parallels should be between weighty elements in each episode rather than inconsequential details
4. Trademarks: Types of parallels at work should be specified, thus building up trademark techniques of the author
5. Integrity: Messages communicated through parallelism between episodes should be consistent with overall structure
6. Agreement: The majority of parallels should be able to be reinforced with reference to the work of other scholars
7. Satisfaction: Parallels should be satisfying to both lay readers and scholars

Can a Consensus Emerge?

Identifying Six Commonly Mentioned Criteria

Clearly, there are a number of challenges within chiasmic studies, and the discussion about how to identify chiasms continues.⁵¹ But pointing out the many different lists of criteria floating around overstates the level of disarray and confusion. Even though there is no universally accepted set of criteria, several common threads run throughout the various proposals. Based on my survey of the literature, I have identified some of the most widely agreed upon criteria, shown in table 11.⁵²

Table 11: Six Commonly Agreed on Criteria for Evaluating and Analyzing Chiasms

1. Chiasms should conform to natural literary boundaries.⁵³
2. A climax or turning point should be found at the center.⁵⁴
3. Chiasms should display a relatively well-balanced symmetry.⁵⁵

4. The structure should be based on major keywords, phrases, or themes.⁵⁶
5. Chiasms should manifest little, if any, extraneous repetition or divergent materials.⁵⁷
6. The chiastic order should typically not compete with other strong literary forms.⁵⁸

Does this list represent the very best set of criteria? Perhaps not. It does, however, represent the ideas that have proven to have broad utility in the eyes of several different analysts. As one set of criteria after another gets critically examined and replaced, these six criteria persist again and again in the literature, and some weight stands behind each of these criteria.

Still, this should not be mistaken for an emerging consensus. One or more of these criteria has been challenged in recent years, and no criterion is *universally* accepted. At the very least, these six criteria represent common ground. While no one scholar may agree with the list in its entirety, every scholar probably agrees with *something* on this list—and hopefully two, or three, or more. As such, it may at least provide scholars with somewhere to start moving forward.

What Still Needs to be Done in the Study of Chiastic Criteria?

In light of this review of the literature on chiasmus criteria, a number of persistent issues and questions come to mind, which may need to be addressed at some point in the future, not the least of which is figuring what a chiasm *is*, exactly.⁵⁹ We need to know something of what it is we are looking for, if we are going to be able to evaluate the merits of any criteria proposing to help us find it. A basic definition of chiasmus was introduced above, but some would consider such a definition inadequate, and there are good reasons why. Is really *any* inverted pattern of parallels a chiasm, even accidental or meaningless ones? If so, then those are certainly not the *type* of chiasms we are trying to find. Breck, Thomson, and others contend that chiasms, by definition, have meaning; if that is true, then useful criteria need to reflect that (and many of them do).

Related to questions of meaning are questions of intentionality—and this is usually what chiasmus criteria are most specifically aiming to resolve. The goal is to identify structures that are *deliberate*, not *accidental*. While some authors might sometimes refer to “accidental chiasms,”

I would contend that intentionality should, like meaning, be built into the definition. While random, accidental inverted patterns sometimes occur, these are not what we are seeking to discover and should not be considered true chiasms. Chiasms that are worth studying are intentional, purposeful structures used by an author deliberately to give a passage weight, meaning, and beauty. But questions still arise as to what this means.

Put in terms of intentional vs. accidental, I think most agree that intentional is what we are looking for. But is there a difference between intentional and *conscious* chiasms, or accidental and *subconscious* chiasms? Some have suggested that just as native speakers of a language naturally and unconsciously speak in accordance with many complex and orderly rules of syntax and grammar, so might a scribe immersed in a literary culture which favors chiasmus use it unconsciously.⁶⁰ Is such use accidental? Musicians and artists similarly create beautiful works of art and music in accordance with already existing rules of order, but the person creating the music or art may not be consciously aware of all those rules. Yet, although the rules were followed only subconsciously, no one would assert that the final product was an accident or the result of random chance, and certainly the musical or artistic rendition is often still beautiful and worthy of notice as a work of art.⁶¹ What about chiasmus? Can chiasms be composed subconsciously that are still deliberate, meaningful, and beautiful?

Terminological issues, as well, could benefit from some careful discussion among scholars. A number of terms other than *chiasmus* have been used in reference to inverted parallelism, such as symmetrical parallels, concentric symmetry, antimetabole, palistrophe, envelope structures, and ring form. Are these all merely synonyms for chiasmus, or are there nuances of meaning that differentiate them? It seems to depend on whom is using the term. Some use *chiasmus* as a catch-all term for all forms of reverse symmetry, while others consider it one of many different types of inverted parallels. For example, some would differentiate between inverted patterns that have a single element in the center (a-b-c-b-a) from those with two elements in the center (a-b-c-c-b-a), with only the latter being a chiasm and the former considered a concentric pattern.⁶² There even seems to be disagreement on how to use *chiasmus* vs. *chiasm*, with some treating the terms as synonymous while others use them in distinct ways.⁶³ These terminological issues are not often discussed in the literature, but scholars could benefit from greater terminological precision, which often brings greater clarity to the exposition of any subject.

There may also be a need for clarifying and identifying separate criteria for chiasmus in different cultures. Is the use of chiasmus in the New Testament the same as the use of chiasmus in the Old Testament? What about chiasmus in the broader Greco-Roman or ancient Near Eastern cultures? If there are differences in how chiasmus functions transculturally, does that have any impact on how it is identified? What about the use of chiasmus beyond the sphere of “the biblical world,” such as in the works of Beowulf or Shakespeare?⁶⁴ In the 1980s, Allen Christenson identified chiasmus in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the K’iche’ Maya,⁶⁵ and since that time Gretchen Whalen has stated that “chiasmus . . . is the culmination of Maya literary style.”⁶⁶ How might understanding the way chiasmus is used in Maya literature and other cultures from outside the biblical world inform the discussion of chiasmus criteria?

This brings up issues of descriptive vs. prescriptive criteria—something that comes up in the literature, particularly as a criticism of Lund, Breck, and others. Criteria like the “laws” of Lund and Breck are seen as only *describing* how chiasmus works and functions, not *prescribing* its identifying characteristics. For the most part, I agree that this observation is accurate. At the same time, however, *if* chiasmus is known to function a certain way, and a proposed chiasm *does not* work that way, would that not be evidence that it is not a chiasm at all? Do descriptive criteria not then become prescriptive in that case? It would seem that anything which accurately describes chiasmus can help to accurately prescribe chiasmus. But the catch is “accurately”—and this is where a deeper problem surfaces. In order to identify chiasms, you have to know what a valid chiasm is. You can only know what a valid chiasm is, however, if you have identified valid chiasms to study. But you cannot identify valid chiasms without already knowing what a valid chiasm is and what it looks like. A certain amount of circularity exists in this process; greater awareness in dealing with this issue may be called for going forward.⁶⁷

Finally, there is the tension of objective vs. subjective judgments in establishing criteria. This is strongly debated in the literature. Everyone wants to establish “rigorous criteria” that can resolve problems in identifying chiasms. But often, some of those criteria themselves involve subjective or interpretive judgments on the part of the readers, and over and over again analysts note that not all criteria need to be met. Generally, the desire for rigorous methods of identifying chiasms must be tempered with the reality that artistic expression is rarely confined to the rules outsiders wish to impose on it. How to be rigorous in identifying

chiasms while allowing ancient authors the flexibility to use this literary form as they saw fit will no doubt remain a subject of continued discussion and debate as this tool of literary criticism continues to be refined and moves forward.

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Notes

1. I'd like to thank Stephen Ehat for sharing his extensive notes on various scholars and their criteria for identifying chiasmus. These were immensely helpful to me in preparing this short review.

2. John W. Welch, "Chiasm, Chiasmus: I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (ed. Hans-Josef Klauck; vol. 5; Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 78.

3. D. Joh. Alberti Bengelii, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (2 vols.; 3d ed.; London: David Nutt, 1850), 2:758–60. For an English translation, see John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament* (trans. Andrew R. Fausset et al.; 5 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858–59), 5:396–99.

4. John Jebb, *Sacred Literature* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1820), 335–62.

5. The most significant of the nineteenth-century writers was probably John Forbes, *The Symmetrical Structure of Scripture* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1854), 35–46.

6. Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 40.

7. This table paraphrases Lund's laws as given in Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, 40–41, using Lund's exact verbiage as much as possible so as to represent his ideas accurately. What Lund means by "system" is the chiasm itself, or what most today would call the chiastic structure.

8. Compare R. Alan Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," *New Testament Studies* 27, no. 1 (1980): 6–7; Wayne Brouwer, *The Literary Development of John 13–17: A Chiastic Reading* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 31; Steven Richard Scott, "Raising the Dead: Finding History in the Gospel Accounts of Jesus's Resurrection Miracles" (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2010), 60. Ian H. Thomson, in *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26–27, attempted to rewrite Lund's laws in developing his own criteria.

9. Paul Gaechter, *Literary Art in the Gospel of Matthew* (trans. Lore Schultheiss; Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2013), <https://chiasmusresources.org/literary-art-gospel-matthew>.

Originally published as Paul Gaechter, *Die literarische Kunst im Matthäus-Evangelium* (SBS 7; Stuttgart, 1965).

10. Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1–3:6," *JBL* 92, no. 3 (1973): 394–401.
11. David J. Clark, "Criteria for Identifying Chiasm," *LB* 35 (1975): 63–72.
12. This table paraphrases criteria outlined in Clark, "Criteria," 63.
13. Clark, "Criteria," 65.
14. Clark, "Criteria," 65, 66.
15. Culpepper, "Pivot of John's Prologue," 6–9.
16. John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structure, Analysis, Exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981; repr. Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999).
17. Wilfred G. E. Waston, "Chiastic Patterns in Biblical Hebrew Poetry," in Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 137.
18. David Noel Freedman, "Preface," in Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 7.
19. John W. Welch, "Introduction," in Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 13.
20. Welch, "Introduction," 13.
21. Welch, "Introduction," 13.
22. See Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986; 2d ed., 2014), 4. Rendsburg does not specifically mention or cite Dewey or Clark, but his approach is nonetheless similar.
23. Rendsburg, *Redaction of Genesis*, 50.
24. Craig Blomberg, "The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," *CTR* 4, no. 1 (1989): 4, 5. Blomberg felt that Clark "promises more than he delivers" (5n7).
25. Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 5. Table 3 paraphrases the criteria outlined on pp. 5–7, using as much of Blomberg's verbiage as possible to present his ideas accurately.
26. Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 7, capitalization altered.
27. Mike Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994); Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*.
28. Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah*, 60.
29. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 25–33. Table 4 paraphrases Thomson's characteristics, requirements, and constraints, relying on his own verbiage as much as possible to present his ideas accurately. The lowercase lettering for each criterion preserves the lettering used by Thomson.
30. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 32.
31. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 33–34.
32. Breck, *Shape of Biblical Language*, 58.
33. The criteria in table 5 directly quote the criteria headings used by Breck, *Shape of Biblical Language*, 335–39.
34. Breck, *Shape of Biblical Language*, 339.
35. Breck, *Shape of Biblical Language*, 42.
36. The criteria in this table paraphrase John W. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4 (Fall 1995): 1–14; republished in *Chiasmus Bibliography*, ed. John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinlay (Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999), 157–74. Welch's own verbiage is frequently used to ensure his views are faithfully presented.

37. Welch, "Criteria" (1999), 172.

38. Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 11. See also Clark, "Criteria," 65: "Parallelism of content . . . is to be seen as a cline with varying degrees of strength and persuasiveness rather than as a feature which is definitely either present or absent."

39. M. J. Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity: Symmetrical Mirages in Nehemiah 9," *JSOT* 71 (1996): 55–70.

40. David P. Wright, "The Fallacies of Chiasmus: A Critique of Structures Proposed for the Covenant Collection (Exodus 20:23–23:19)," *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 10 (2004): 143–68.

41. These tables paraphrase Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity," 56–58; and Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 166–68, drawing on their own verbiage as much as possible so as to represent their ideas accurately.

42. Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 168.

43. See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 15–44.

44. Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 34–35. Table 9 paraphrases Dorsey, using his own verbiage as much as possible so as to represent his ideas accurately.

45. Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 35. Compare p. 33: "The determining question must always be this: could the ancient audience have perceived and appreciated the echo?"

46. See Brouwer, *Literary Development of John 13–17*.

47. See Matthew Thomas Gerlach, "Lex Orandi, Lex Legendi: A Correlation of the Roman Canon and the Fourfold Sense of Scripture" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2009), 174–82; David Mark Heath, "Chiastic Structures in Hebrews: A Study of Form and Function in Biblical Discourse" (PhD diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2011), 59–113; Michelle L. Bellamy, "The Elijah-Elisha Cycle of Stories: A Ring Composition" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2013), 56–58.

48. Scott, "Raising the Dead," 53–163, esp. 141–44.

49. James E. Patrick, "The Prophetic Structure of 1–2 Samuel" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2016), 88–98. Table 10 paraphrases Patrick, using as much of his verbiage as possible so as to accurately represent his ideas.

50. Patrick, "Prophetic Structure," 98–99, 238.

51. For example, Joshua Berman recently proposed four criteria, while questioning some of the assumptions previously used in other studies, showing the discussion is indeed on-going. See Joshua Berman, "Criteria for Establishing Chiastic Structure: Lamentations 1 and 2 as Test Cases," *Maarav: A Journal for the Study of the Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures* 21, nos. 1–2 (2014): 57–69.

52. I have tried to articulate common themes I have noticed in the various discussions cited above; exact wording and nuance of meaning naturally differs from scholar to scholar. I have provided notes identifying some of the scholars proposing or agreeing with these criteria, but these sources should be directly consulted before assuming my summary statement is representative of any given scholar's view. Furthermore, this is not a comprehensive list of criteria with widespread support, and no doubt there are other widely accepted criteria that could be added to this list. These six criteria stuck out to me most prominently during the course of this study, but a comprehensive and systematic analysis of proposed criteria remains to be done in determining exactly what are the most widely agreed upon criteria and methods.

53. Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 6 (no. 3); Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 7 (no. 7); Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 21–25; Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of*

Zechariah, 60 (no. 6a); Berman, "Criteria," 58 (no. 3); Scott, "Raising the Dead," 143 (no. 1); Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity," 57 (no. b2); Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 166–167 (nos. b4, b10); Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 29 (c, see commentary on "third requirement" on pp. 29–30).

54. Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 8–9 (nos. 10, 12); Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 7 (no. 8); Breck, *Shape of Biblical Language*, 336–38 (no. 2), 339–41 (no. 4), 341–42 (no. 1); Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 31 (no. 4), 40–41 (nos. 1–4); Patrick, "Prophetic Structure," 88; Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, 40–41 (nos. 1–2); Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 27 (a, f).

55. Berman, "Criteria," 58 (no. 2); Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 6–7 (no. 6), 8 (no. 11); Patrick, "Prophetic Structure," 89 (no. 1); Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity," 56 (no. a1); Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 166 (no. a1); Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 27 (e). Although not specified as a criterion, Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah*, 18–60, strongly critiques others for unbalanced elements in their proposals.

56. Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 6 (no. 4); Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 7 (no. 7); Patrick, "Prophetic Structure," 90–91 (no. 3); Clark, "Criteria," 65; Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah*, 59–60 (compare no. 6b–c); Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity," 57–58 (no. c1); Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 167 (no. b7–8). Although not discussed as part of his criteria, Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 41–42 (b), also mentions the importance of key words or "catchwords."

57. Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 6 (no. 5); Berman, "Criteria," 58–59 (no. 4); Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 7–8 (nos. 8–9); Patrick, "Prophetic Structure," 90 (no. 2); Scott, "Raising the Dead," 143 (no. 2); Boda, "Chiasmus in Ubiquity," 57 (no. b1); Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 166 (no. b1); Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 31–32 (e, f). Although not specified as a criterion, Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah*, 18–60, strongly critiques others for cherry-picking only a few occurrences of certain words that are frequently repeated throughout a passage.

58. Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 6 (no. 4); Blomberg, "Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7," 5 (no. 1); Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 35 (nos. 9–10); Wright, "Fallacies of Chiasmus," 167 (no. b11–12). Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah*, 18–60, frequently critiques others for not checking for other proposed structures in the passage, and his criteria to "consider the conclusions of other scholars" appears to be intended to remedy this problem. Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah*, 60 (no. 6d).

59. See Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 25–26.

60. For example, see Breck, *Shape of Biblical Language*, 325–29, which argues for a modern chiasm in an op-ed. on medical research in the *Boston Globe*, from an author who "was not at all aware of the chiasmic shape she gave to this piece" (p. 325). Breck argues that "the writer, although making no conscious effort to create balance and concentric symmetry, nevertheless 'sensed' or intuited a chiasmic movement or flow as she composed her column" (p. 328).

61. See Welch, "Criteria" (1995), 10–13; Clark, "Criteria," 71–72.

62. See, e.g., Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 13–34; Patrick, "Prophetic Structure," 87–88.

63. For my part, I see the relationship as similar to the terms *poem* and *poetry*. *Poetry* is a style of writing, and a *poem* is a specific piece of literature within the style. Likewise, as I use the terms, *chiasmus* is a literary technique, and a *chiasm* is a specific passage using chiasmic form.

64. To see all the different literary eras and cultures in which chiasms have been proposed, see <https://chiasmusresources.org/chiasmus-index> (accessed June 18, 2018).

65. Allen J. Christenson, "The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient Maya-Quiché," *Latin American Literatures Journal* 4 (Fall 1988): 125–50. See, more recently, Allen J. Christenson, "The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient K'iche' Maya," in *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Period Maya Literature* (ed. Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco; Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012), 311–36. See also Kerry M. Hull, "Mirrored Poeticity: Chiastic Structuring in Mayan Languages," this volume.

66. Gretchen Whalen, "The Power of the Paradigm: Continuity in Yucatec Maya Narrative" (delivered at meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Guadalajara, Mexico: 1997), 12.

67. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters*, 33–34, shows this kind of awareness in admitting that his own method is "unavoidably circular" and attempting to address the circularity.