

The Significance of the Chiastic Structure of Ephesians 1:3 – 14 for Defining ‘Predestined’

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The Chiastic Structure of Ephesians 1:3 – 14

^{1:3}**Blessed** be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

who has blessed us with every **spiritual blessing** in the heavenly places in Christ,

⁴ just as **He chose us in him** before the foundation of the world,

that we would be holy and blameless before Him

in love ⁵**He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ** to Himself,

according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory

of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the beloved

⁷ in him we have **redemption** through his blood,

the **forgiveness** of our trespasses, according to the riches

of His grace ⁸ **which He lavished on us** in all wisdom and insight

⁹ He made known to us the mystery of **His will, according to His kind intention** which He purposed

in him ¹⁰ with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times,

that is, the summing up of **all things** in Christ,

things in the heavens and things on the earth

in him ¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance,

having been **predestined** according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

¹² to the end **that we** who were the first to hope in Christ **would be to the praise of His glory**

¹³ in him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation--**having also**

believed, you were sealed in him with the Holy Spirit of promise,

¹⁴ who is given as a pledge of our **inheritance**, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the **praise of His glory**.

Summary

Blessed be God

We have every spiritual blessing

He chose us in him

That we would be holy and blameless

He predestined us to adoption

According to the kind intention of His will

Grace freely bestowed

Redemption by his blood

Forgiveness of our trespasses

Grace lavished upon us

According to the kind intention of His will

In him is an administration [household]

All things summed up in Christ

Things in heaven and on earth

In him we have an inheritance

He predestined us according to His purpose

That we would be to the praise of His glory

You were sealed in him by the Spirit, having believed

We have an inheritance

Praise be to God

Points of Comparison

- Paul appears to use a double chiastic structure in 1 Corinthians 1:17 – 2:2. See Kenneth Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). Most of 1 Corinthians is chiastic; see my outlines online at http://nagasawafamily.org/paul_1corinthians.chiastic.structure.mako.pdf
- Matthew's Gospel appears to be structured in the same chiastic way, with a double point at the center of Mt.12:46 – 13:58. See <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-chiasm.pdf>.
- Paul structures Ephesians 2:11 – 22 in a chiasm, so we can be confident that Paul used this literary structure in Ephesians itself. See below.

What is a Chiasm?

The chiasm is a literary structure. In a chiasm, the first point matches the last point. The second point matches the second to last point, and so on. The center point is the place of emphasis and interprets or answers something raised in the outer points. It is often the turning point in the story or poem. For example, a very simple modern day chiasm is reflected in this dialogue:

- A John: Are you going to the party?
- B Emily: Is Amy going?
- B' John: Yes, Amy is going.
- A' Emily: Then I'm definitely going!

This dialogue has a chiastic structure, where the center, or inner, point interprets or answers the outer point. In this simple case, the question of whether Amy is going to the party is the turning point for Emily. It answers the question of Emily's attendance.

Much larger chiasms were fairly common in ancient and classical literature. Here is an example in Homer's *Iliad*. This is Phoenix's speech to Achilles in Lattimore's translation, book 9, lines 437–445:

- A. How then shall I, dear child, be left in this place behind you all alone? Peleus the aged horseman sent me forth with you on that day when he sent you from Phthia to Agamemnon a mere child, who knew nothing yet
- B. of the joining of battle nor
- C. of debate
- D. where men are made pre-eminent.
Therefore he sent me along with you
to teach you of all these matters,
- C'. to make you a speaker of words and
- B'. one who is accomplished in action.
- A'. Therefore apart from you, dear child, I would not be willing to be left behind.

Phoenix's speech unfolds in a chiasm, as he tries to persuade Achilles to not return home but rather accompany the Greek forces to do battle with Troy. Phoenix does not want 'to be left in this place behind you' (A). He says that Achilles needed to learn skill in battle (B) and also in rhetoric and debate (C), two of the greatest skills by which Greek heroes earned honor. So Phoenix appeals to his role as Achilles' guardian and teacher in 'all these matters' (D). That is the main point of his speech. He has played his part in training Achilles in words (C') and action (B'). He returns at the end to express that sentiment in a more fatherly, tender way: 'Therefore apart from you, dear child, I would not be willing to be left behind' (A').

The human authors of Scripture employed this literary structure as well. The chiasm probably helped them memorize the material and tell stories orally. Examples of Scripture passages found to be arranged in a chiastic form include: the Noah story (Genesis 5:1 – 9:29)¹; the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar story (Genesis 12 – 22)²; the Jacob, Leah, and Rachel story (Genesis 25 – 35)³; the Joseph and Judah story (Genesis 37 – 50)⁴; the story of Israel's wilderness wandering (Numbers 1 – 36)⁵; the entire Pentateuch (Genesis 1 – Deuteronomy 34)⁶; the entire

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VT* 28 (1978): 338. See also Bernhard W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1 – 11," *JBL* 97 (1978): 23-29.

² Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (2nd publishing Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 2000), p.114

³ J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), p.53 – 54

⁴ Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 2nd publishing 2000), p.115

⁵ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Chiastic Structure of the Book of Numbers*, <http://nagasawafamily.org/numbers-chiasm.pdf>

Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 1 – 28)⁷; Jesus' Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:14 – 30)⁸; Jesus' prodigal son story is arranged in 2 chiasms – one for the younger son and one for the older (Luke 15:11 – 32)⁹; Paul's reflection on righteousness by faith in Galatians 3:5 – 14¹⁰; and Paul's comparison of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12 – 21, to name a few. Paul employed the chiastic form in Ephesians itself, in 2:11 – 22¹¹, suggesting that he had thought a great deal about the literary and poetic arrangement of the material in Ephesians, which reinforces the observation that Ephesians was not directed at a particular church problem.

^{2:11} Therefore remember then that formerly **you, the Gentiles** in the flesh, who are called 'uncircumcision' by **the so-called 'circumcision'** which is performed in the flesh by human hands –

¹² remember that you were once **separate** from Christ, **excluded** from the commonwealth of Israel, **strangers** to the covenants of promise

Having **no hope** and **without God** in the world.

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who were once **far off** have been brought **near** by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he is our **peace**, who has made **both groups into one** and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall ¹⁵ by **abolishing** in his flesh the **enmity**,

the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in himself he might make the two into one new humanity

thus establishing **peace**, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them **both in one body** to God through the cross, by it having **put to death** the **enmity**.

¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were **far away** and peace to those who were **near**

¹⁸ for through him **we both have our access** in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹ So then you are no longer **strangers** and **aliens** but you are **fellow citizens** with the saints and members of the household of God

²⁰ having been built upon the **foundation of the apostles and prophets** (Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord

²² in whom **you also** are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

I have highlighted parallel words or ideas in bold. In Ephesians 2:11 – 22, the center point is a turning point. There is a reversal as Gentiles and Jews are brought together in Christ. They are no longer far and near from God. The enmity is done away with. The Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens but rather fellow citizens with believing Jews. And the community, which is a new Temple, is made up of the Jewish foundation of apostles and prophets, and also Gentiles who are included. Markers go from 'in the flesh' in v.11 (twice) to 'in the Lord' in v.21 and 'in the Spirit' in v.22. The motif of the old Temple in Jerusalem is present in v.11 – 15 in references to being far off and in the reference to the barrier of the dividing wall, but that gives way to the motif of the new Temple 'in Christ' starting from the center extending to the last point. The literary structure itself helps us identify Paul's main emphasis and what he understood to be the monumental change brought about by Jesus vis-à-vis Jewish-Gentile relations.

The arrangement of early material in Ephesians suggests that Ephesians 1:3 – 14 is chiastic. I discern this arrangement of material in Ephesians.

- Paul's First Poem: We Are God's New Chosen People, Jew and Gentile in Christ (1:1 – 14)
- Paul's First Prayer: Experience God's Resurrection Power (1:15 – 2:10)
- Paul's Second Poem: We Are God's New Temple (2:11 – 22, plus reflection 3:1 – 13)
- Paul's Second Prayer: Experience Power to Hold the Fullness of God (3:14 – 21)
- Living as God's People: Walking and Speaking (4:1 – 6:9)

⁶ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Literary Analysis of the Torah*, <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-pentateuch-chiasm.pdf>

⁷ Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Chiastic Structure of the Gospel of Matthew*, <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-chiasm.pdf>

⁸ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p.68 – 69; this is an excellent resource to see many examples of parallel and inverted parallel (chiastic) literary structures in the biblical text

⁹ Bailey, p.159 – 160, 190 – 191

¹⁰ Bailey, p.54

¹¹ Bailey, p.63

- Your Prayer: Standing Firm in Prayer (6:10 – 24)

This is not to deny the validity of other ways of arranging the material in Ephesians. However, I believe it is significant that Paul follows his exposition of being the new Temple (2:11 – 22) with a prayer related to being the new Temple (3:14 – 21), albeit separated by a pastoral interlude wherein Paul makes sure his audience understands that his imprisonment for the sake of the Gentile mission is nothing to be ashamed of (3:1 – 13). The same movement from exposition to prayer is found in 1:3 – 14 and then 1:15 – 2:10. In 1:3 – 14, Paul gives an exposition of being the redeemed people of God using Exodus motifs of adoption as son, redemption, blood, and inheritance. Then, in 1:15 – 2:10, commensurate with his exposition of the theme of redemption by God's power, he prays that his audience would more deeply experience the power of Jesus' resurrection which redeemed them from sin in the first place. If Ephesians 2:11 – 22 was a chiasmic exposition which led Paul to prayer in 3:14 – 21, I think it reasonable to perceive in Ephesians 1:3 – 14 a chiasmic exposition which led Paul to prayer in 1:15 – 2:10.

Significance of the Chiasmic Format in Ephesians 1:3 – 14

So what is the significance of discerning a chiasm in Ephesians 1:3 – 14, especially in relation to the definition of 'predestination'? In chiasmic structures, the center point interprets or explains the outside points. That is simply the way Paul, given the cultural and literary tools with which he was familiar (and of which he had a high degree of mastery), communicated the spiritual realities concerning the Triune God of whom he was speaking. The implications are as follows:

- God is summing up ('recapitulating') *all things*, including *all people*, 'in Christ' or 'under' Christ (v.10).
- Some people read Ephesians in a *linear* fashion without regard to the chiasmic literary organization of 1:3 – 14. The question then arises: Does the fact that God chose 'us' in v.3 and 4 for salvation also mean that God has not chosen others (as in the doctrine of single predestination)? Or has God actively chosen others for damnation rather than salvation (as in double predestination)? But this 'linear' way of reading 1:3 – 14 does not respect the literary organization of the material itself, which in turn reflects the true mind of the human author under the impress of the Holy Spirit. The *chiasmic* structure means that the thought at the *center* – in this case, the summing up of *all things in Christ* – interprets and explains what the terms 'chose' or 'predestined' might mean. Therefore, Paul's references to 'us,' 'we,' and 'you' as being chosen by God, and predestined by God, do not qualify the 'all things' of v.9 – 10 which will be summed up in Christ. That is to say, other people are not 'unchosen' in whatever sense, and an inference to that effect has no textual basis here in 1:3 – 14.
- God's choice to bless all people revolves around and is carried out *in Christ, the beloved* (v.6), which means *the chosen one*, who shares his inheritance and blessing with us. The idea that Israel was God's *chosen people* was narrowed over time such that the Messiah alone would faithfully represent Israel and be Israel, and therefore be the *chosen one*.
- To see Jesus identified as *the chosen one*, observe how Matthew refers to Jesus as 'My beloved Son' at the transfiguration (Mt.17:5) whereas Luke uses the phrase 'My Chosen One,' also at the transfiguration (Lk.9:35). At the very least, then, we must conclude that Matthew and Luke believed those titles are interchangeable with respect to Jesus. Additionally, the Jewish rulers call Jesus 'the Chosen One' when they mock him (Lk.23:35), inadvertently testifying to the fact that Jews were comfortable calling the Messiah by that title. This strongly suggests that *beloved one* and *chosen one* are titles slightly different but basically interchangeable ways of referring to the Messiah. The quotation from Isaiah's Servant Song marking Jesus out as 'My Servant whom I have *chosen*, My *beloved* in whom my soul is well-pleased' (Mt.12:18) also ties together the titles of *chosen one* and *beloved one*. Implicitly, the pronouncement at Jesus' baptism from the Father that Jesus is the *beloved Son* (Mt.3:13 – 17; Lk.3:21 – 22) attests to Jesus being the *chosen one*. In any case, the Messiah is given titles that Israel as a whole shared as *the chosen people*. This attests to the Jewish view already present that the Messiah would represent Israel in himself.

In chiasmic structures, points are mirrored. The implications include:

- *God's choice* ('He chose us in him' in v.4) is symmetrically arranged with *our choice* to believe in Christ ('in him you also...believed' in v.13). And God's initiative to *choose us in him* is mirrored with the believer being *sealed in him by the Spirit*. This affirms the position that the humanity of Christ is all-inclusive in its range and atoning effectiveness. Unbelief apparently results in the person trying to place themselves *outside* Christ. In what sense s/he might succeed in doing so is a secondary but important question. Answering that question takes us outside the text of Ephesians.

- God's predestination of believers through adoption (v.5) is symmetrically arranged with the inheritance God bestows (v.11), not to any statement of exclusion of others
- Hence, the term 'predestination' here, as in Romans, refers to the *destination* of all things to be re-headed up under Jesus, and the inheritance of the new creation given first to Jesus; how we experience that is up to us

For a much more robust discussion of the biblical term 'predestination' and connected ideas, see my exegesis of Romans 9 – 11 and notation of early Christian theologians' opinions of that material, in *Romans 9 – 11, Predestination and Free Will, the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart, and Ongoing Outreach to the Jewish Community*, found here: http://nagasawafamily.org/paul_romans.09-11.hardening.ppts.pdf

I am not saying that literary analysis is the only way, or even a completely sure way, to discern the appropriate definition of the word 'predestined' or the appropriate relation between the 'us' and the 'all things.' Theology as a discipline can simply start with the reality of the Triune God and carefully work out from there what human language, limited as it is, means when it is applied to the reality of God, whom we are trying to know and describe. But I am saying that literary analysis here nicely corroborates what classical Trinitarian theologians like Athanasius and contemporary ones like T.F. Torrance have been telling us about the considerations about human language that we must take when doing theological reflection.¹² After all, if the chiasmic structure is a way of knowing the mind of (at least) the human author, then what matters is not only the words selected, but the *arrangement of those words* used by the human author.

¹² T.F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.204 says, 'Hence Athanasius insisted that when our ordinary terms are applied to God they must be *stretched* beyond their usual sense and reference and must be employed in such a way that they indicate more than the actual terms can naturally specify.' (emphasis his) Note, however, that on the specific word 'predestine', David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith* (London: Quercus, 2012), p.77 says, 'Such an idea never really arose in the Eastern Christian world. In large part, this difference is attributable to the vagaries of translation. The Latin word 'praedestinare' is a far stronger verb than the original Greek 'proorizein,' which really means little more than to 'mark out in advance.' More importantly, Augustine's interpretations of certain passages in Paul were quite novel. For instance, he read Romans chapters 9 – 11 as a discourse on the predestination and reprobation of souls, even though those chapters appear really to concern the estrangement and ultimate reconciliation of Israel and the Church; Paul does not discuss salvation there at all, except to opine that all of Israel will be saved. Similar problems of translation probably account for the significant differences between Eastern and Western understandings of [ancestral sin vs.] original sin. All Christians believe that we are born in sin – that is, enslaved to death, suffering corruption in our bodies, minds and desires, alienated from God – but only in the West did the idea arise that a newborn infant is somehow already guilty of transgression in God's eyes. In part, this is because the Latin text of Romans 5:12 with which Augustine was familiar contained a mistranslation of the final clause of the verse, one that seemed to suggest that 'in' Adam 'all sinned'. The actual Greek text, however, says nothing of the sort; it says either that as a result of death all sinned, or that because sin is general all things die; but it does not impute guilt to those who have not yet committed any evil.' Very critical here is the distinction between ancestral sin (held by the Eastern Orthodox to mean the inheritance of a corrupted human nature from Adam and Eve) and original sin (held by Roman Catholics and many Protestants to mean the transmission of the guilt of Adam and Eve).