The Chiastic Structure of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

Although not usually noted in discussions on the passage, a chiastic structure appears to be present in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12. Following some introductory comments on chiasmus in Scripture, therefore, a proposal for this structure in the present passage will be made and defended. Certain points of exegetical significance often may be derived from use of chiastic structure, and brief comments as to the exegetical significance of the structure will follow.

Chiasmus and the Text of Scripture

A literary chiasm occurs when elements of a given literary unit are structured and balanced symmetrically in an inverted parallelism.1 The chiastic form is still commonly used, though not with near the ubiquity it seems to have enjoyed in antiquity.2 Although the use of chiasmus in Scripture was explicitly noted as early as the mid-1800's, the form did not receive significant attention until the seminal works of Nils Lund two centuries later.3 Since Lund, a constant stream of works has sought to define and delimit chiasmus in Scripture and other

1As a brief example, consider 1 John 3:9: “(A) Whoever has been born of God (B) does not sin (C) because his seed remains in him (B’) and he is not able to sin (A’) because he has been born of God.” For discussion of definition, see the excellent treatment of Ian H. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 25-27.

2This is demonstrated by the various essays in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981). Referring to the second gospel, Stock affirms that “it was perfectly natural for a person of Mark’s background to use chiasmus and . . . most literate persons of his time would recognize its presence and appreciate it to a high degree.” Augustine Stock, “Chiastic Awareness and Education in Antiquity,” *BTB* 14 (1984), 23.

3Lund’s major work was published as *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), and was preceded by a series of articles published between 1930 and 1934, including “The Presence of Chiasmus in the New Testament,” *JR* 10 (1930), 74-93.
ancient literature. Within both Old and New Testaments, chiasmus has been proposed for literary units ranging from single verses to entire books. At one end of the scale, concise chasms with only two or three sets of parallel elements are routinely acknowledged; conversely, the existence of intentional chiastic structures of extensive length has been strongly debated.

Proposals of chiastic structure in Scripture have at times reflected more scholarly ingenuity than authorial intent. The more Procrustean applications of the chiastic form to Scripture, however, have brought about increasingly sophisticated attempts to develop criteria for identifying chiasmus, which criteria will be implemented in the present work.

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5The categorization of various chiasms differs somewhat from author to author. It is common to refer to a chiasm with only four parallel elements as a micro-chiasm. The term macro-chiasm has been used for anything with a greater number of elements, including chiasms which extend over an entire book. For discussion, see M. Dahood, “Chiasmus,” in IDBSup, 145; Brad McCoy, “Chiasmus: An Important Structural Device Commonly Found in Biblical Literature,” CTJ 9:2 (Fall 2003), 19-20; Thomson, 22-23. Terminology seems generally to be based on the number of elements in a given chiasm, without giving attention to the relative length of each element (e.g., phrases, clauses, paragraphs).

6Most treatments of chiasm give examples of micro-chiasmus; for examples of such in Paul, see, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, “Chiasmus in den Paulusbriefen,” ZNW 49 (1958), 145-156; Lund, Chiasmus, 145-225 (often contained within larger chiasms). For critique of intentional macro-chiasmus, see Aune, “Chiasm,” 96; Thomson, Chiasmus, 30-31; and especially Stanley E. Porter and Jeffrey T. Reed, “Philippians as a Macro-Chiasm and Its Exegetical Significance,” NTS 44 (1998), 213-32. The existence of intentional macro-chiasmus has been decisively demonstrated, however, by Wayne Brouwer, The Literary Development of John 13-16: A Chiastic Reading, SBLDS 182 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 63-85.

7Thomson, for instance, while seeing value in a number of “laws” of chiasm set down by Lund (Lund, Chiasmus, 40-42), carefully considers methodology and more carefully nuances guidelines for identifying the presence of chiasmus of intermediate length (Thomson, Chiasmus, 22-34). For suggested guidelines for the identification of larger chiasms, see Craig L. Blomberg, “The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1-7,” CTR 4.1 (1989), 4-8; David J. Clark, “Criteria for Identifying Chiasm,” LB 35 (1974). These treatments and others are well summarized in
Demonstration of Chiastic Structure

The direct lexical parallels in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 seem to indicate that Paul has structured the passage chiastically, although few commentators recognize this structure. Krodol, for instance, proposes a brief five-part schema encompassing the entire third chapter:

A) Transition, 3:1-5
B) Command to keep away from the disorderly, 3:6
C) The example of Paul, 3:7-10
B’) Command to the disorderly, 3:11-12
A’) Peroratio, including epistolary postscript, 3:13-18

Robert Bailey has developed several proposals for chiastic structure in 1 Thessalonians 3:6-15, of which the following seems to be the most plausible:

A (3:6) We command you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Anointed, to keep away from every brother walking irresponsibly and not in accord with the tradition they received from us.
B (3:7a) For you yourselves know how one must follow us.
C (3:7b-8a) For we were not irresponsible among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying,
D (3:8b) but with labor and toil, working night and day so as not to burden any of you.

Brouwer, 29-45.

8 In addition, major treatments of chiastic structure often will not treat 2 Thessalonians, focusing instead on what are considered authentic Pauline epistles.


10 Robert A. Bailey, The Structure of Paul’s Letters, 2d ed. (Longwood, Fla.: Xulon, 2004), 123. The translation is Bailey’s.
Although developed independently, this structure is roughly identical to that found in John C. Hurd, “Concerning the Authenticity of 2 Thessalonians,” in The Earliest Letters of Paul.
A (3:6a) Now we **command** you, brethren, **in** the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
B (3:6b) **that** you withdraw from every brother who is **leading a disorderly life**
C (3:6c) and **not** according to the **tradition which they received from us**.
D (3:7a) **For** you yourselves know how you ought to **follow our example**,
E (3:7b) **because** we **did not** act in a disorderly manner **among you**,
F (3:8a) **nor** did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it,
F' (3:8b) but **with labor and hardship** we kept working night and day
E' (3:8c) **so** that we **might not** be a burden to **any of you**;
D' (3:9) **not** because we **do not** have the right to this, **but** in order to offer ourselves as a **model** for you, that you might **follow our example**.
C' (3:10) **For even** when we were with you, **we used to give you this order**: if anyone will not **work**, neither let him eat.
B' (3:11) **For we hear** that some among you are **leading a disorderly life**, doing no work at all, **but acting like busybodies**.
A' (3:12) **Now** such persons we **command** and **exhort** **in** the **Lord Jesus Christ** to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

*(The second set of parentheses in each line contain the number of syllables in the line)*

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A (3:6a)(26) Παραγγέλλομεν δὲ ἡμῖν, ἀδελφοί, ἐν ὑμῶν ἂν ὁμόμετρον κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
B (3:6b)(20) στελέσθαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ παντὸς ἀδελφοῦ ἀτάκτως περιπατοῦντος
C (3:6c)(18) καὶ μὴ κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ἢν παρελάβοσαν περὶ ἡμῶν.
D (3:7a)(13) αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἴδατε πῶς δεῖ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς,
E (3:7b)(11) ὅτι οὐκ ἠτακτίσαμεν ἐν ἡμῖν
F (3:8a)(15) οὐδὲ διωρεάν ἁρτον ἐφάγομεν παρὰ τινὸς,
F' (3:8b)(18) ἀλλ' ἐν κόπῳ καὶ μόνῳ νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐργαζόμενοι
E' (3:8c)(12) πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἐπιμαρτήσῃ τινὰ ἡμῶν·
D' (3:9)(30) οὐχ ὅτι οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν, ἀλλ' ἣν ἐαυτοὶς τύπον δόμημεν ἡμῖν εἰς τὸ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς.
C' (3:10)(34) καὶ γὰρ ὅτε ἦμεν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, τότε παραγγέλλομεν ἡμῖν, ὅτι εἰ τις οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι μοῦ ἐσθίετο.
B' (3:11)(34) ἀκούσομεν γὰρ τινὰς περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἡμῖν ἀτάκτως μηδὲν ἐργαζόμενος ἀλλὰ περιεργαζόμενος·
A' (3:12)(49) τοῖς δὲ τοιούτοις παραγγέλλομεν καὶ περακαλοῦμεν ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ, ἴνα μετὰ ἡσυχίας ἐργαζόμενοι τὸν ἐαυτῶν ἁρτον ἐσθίσαν.
This proposed structure incorporates three pairs of precise lexical parallels.\textsuperscript{12} The parallels of the center sections (E-E’ and F-F’) are rougher conceptual parallels, and it may be that these sections (3:7b-3:8) should be taken as a single unit, central to the chiasm.

Defense of Chiastic Structure

How does this proposed structure measure up against suggested criteria for identifying chiasmus? When subjected to Thomson’s criteria, it fares quite well.\textsuperscript{13}

Thomson suggests three “requirements” (1-3) and several other “constraints” (4-7) to be considered in identifying chiasmus.\textsuperscript{14} (1) “The chiasmus will be present in the text as it stands, and will not require unsupported textual emendation in order to ‘recover’ it.” (2) “The symmetrical elements will be present in precisely inverted order.” (3) “The chiasmus will begin and end at a reasonable point.”\textsuperscript{15} (4) “Chiasmus by headings” will be discouraged as they can

\textsuperscript{12}It does, however, fail to pair two other lexical parallels: ἐγκαζόμενοι (3:8) / ἐγκαζομένοι (3:10); and ἀρτόν ἐφάγομεν (3:8) / ἀρτόν ἐφαγόμεν (3:12), although it may be significant that the latter pair is found in the center element and one outer element. It is not possible to arrange the passage chiastically to accommodate each lexical parallel, given their positions in the text.

\textsuperscript{13}Thomson, 28-34. Thomson’s criteria were chosen for comparison because he is specifically addressing “chiasmus of intermediate length,” which “typically involve around 10-20 elements that may encompass perhaps 7-15 verses.” The proposed chiasm involves 10-12 elements and extends over 7 verses, landing squarely within the realm of Thomson’s study. Others have proposed criteria for identifying chiasm, but those of Clark (“Criteria”) and Blomberg (“Structure”), while of some value, are aimed toward much longer chiasms.

\textsuperscript{14}Thomson, “Chiasmus,” 28-32.

\textsuperscript{15}By this, Thomson means that a chiasm should not have to draw material “from a clearly different preceding or subsequent unit,” and should not begin or end at an awkward point such as the middle of a clause.
create what may be no more than an illusion of chiastic balancing.”

(5) “The selective use of a commonly occurring word in a passage to produce a chiasmus is often a questionable procedure.”

(6) “The existence of non-balancing elements in an otherwise well-developed symmetrical pattern must be very carefully accounted for.”

(7) “A chiasmus, if it is to be defended as being of the author’s making, must be capable of being demonstrated to others, rather than existing only in the mind-set of its ‘discoverer’.”

The three requirements (#1-#3 above) are all clearly fulfilled in the present proposal. As to beginning and ending at a reasonable point, it is universally agreed that 3:6 begins a new paragraph, and the vocative in 3:13 marks out 3:6-12 as a discrete subsection of that paragraph. As to “chiasmus by headings” (#4 above), the present proposal is based for the most part on lexical parallels, not thematic parallels.

Concerning “the selective use of a commonly occurring word” (#5 above), the lexical parallels are not common in the epistle at all. Παραγγέλλω (A - A’) is found in 2 Thessalonians only in chapter 3 (vv. 4, 6, 10, 12), and in each of the balancing elements is modified with “in (the name of) the Lord Jesus Christ.” Περιπατέω (B - B’), not an uncommon word in Paul (30x), is found in 2 Thessalonians only in 3:6 and 3:12, and both times is joined with the adverb ἀπέκτως, which appears nowhere else in the New Testament. The verb μιμήσαμαι (D - D’) is found only here in Paul, and is in the infinitive mood in both instances. Far from being common words, then, the lexical parallels are just the opposite.

16 By “chiasmus by headings,” Thomson refers to proposed chiastic parallelism of topics or themes in the absence of parallelism of vocabulary and/or grammar.

17 The substantival adjective ἀπαντάτως is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, and the verb ἀπαντάτω in 2 Thessalonians 3:7.

18 The cognate μιμητή is found 5x in Paul (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Eph 5:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14).
There seem to be no “non-balancing elements” (#6 above) in the present proposal. Finally, the striking lexical parallels make the chiasm eminently capable of being demonstrated to others (#7 above).

Thomson also gives a number of “characteristics” of chiasms of intermediate length, being careful to point out that their usefulness as diagnostic tests is questionable, and that each characteristic is frequently but not necessarily present in such chiasms.\(^{19}\) Notwithstanding Thomson’s caveats, one of these characteristics at first glance seems problematic for the present proposal: “Balancing elements are normally of approximately the same length. On the few occasions when this is not the case, some explanation seems to be called for.” The second half of the chiasm presently proposed has consistently lengthier elements than the first half. How can this be explained?

To justify the present “unbalanced” treatment of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12, we may look to Parunak, who highlights the use of structural clues in ancient literature which serve much the same function as graphic symbols embedded in modern texts. Parunak notes that the “use of a verse-length panel to anticipate the main points of an argument, usually in chiastic order, becomes especially important in New Testament literature.”\(^{20}\) Man’s study agrees, indicating that chiasms “may be ‘lopsided’ in form, that is, two or more concepts may be stated thematically in an introductory sentence(s), and then the concepts may each be expanded in reverse order.”\(^{21}\) This “lopsided” chiasm is related to Harvey’s category of “inversion,” where initial elements are


expanded significantly in the reflective half of the chiastic structure.\textsuperscript{22} As will be shown below, disparity in length of parallel elements, far from being an indicator that chiasmus might not actually be present, is in reality reflective of the nature of chiasmus itself.

**Significance of Chiastic Structure**

What is the significance of this structure in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12? Chiasmus can make a number of exegetically noteworthy contributions to the understanding of a passage. As one example, it may highlight a key emphasis or concern of a passage by locating it at the center of the chiasm.\textsuperscript{23} More specifically, Thomson notes that ideas found at a chiastic center “may have any of three functions: forming the climax of the argument, indicating its purpose, or acting as an apophthegmatic summary of its contents.”\textsuperscript{24} In the passage at hand, it is noteworthy that, in spite of their differences, each of the various chiastic proposals noted above (Krodel/Menken, Bailey, and the present proposal/Hurd) places the example of Paul and the apostolic team at the center of the structure. The chiastic center here seems to function as “the climax of the argument,” to use Thomson’s category.

As another exegetical contribution of chiasmus, a better understanding of a particular
word or phrase may be gained by comparing it to its chiastic counterpart. Specifically, it is often noted that an element in the second half of a chiasm frequently “intensifies, specifies or completes” its parallel counterpart. In our passage, for instance, “the tradition” (ἡ τάξις παράδοσις) in 3:6 may be clarified by what seems to be its specific content in its chiastic counterpart in 3:10 (“if anyone will not work, neither let him eat”) (ὅτι εἰ τις οὐ θέλει ἔργαξε μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω). Given this common characteristic of chiasmus, it would not seem unusual for elements in the second half of a chiasm to be longer than their parallels in the first half.

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25 Thomson, 43.