

“WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER”:
LITERARY STRUCTURE AS A KEY TO MEANING
IN MATT 17:22–20:19

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There has been much scholarly attention paid lately to the literary structure of Matthew's gospel, but there is no consensus of thought on the subject. This is not only because scholars are divided over just how to go about the process of discerning Matthew's literary structure¹ but also because it is a complex document, employing several kinds of structuring devices.² Those who have undertaken the study of Matthew's structure would generally agree, however, that discerning the overall literary structure first involves finding and identifying the smaller literary components, the units of material that in groups make up larger sections of the gospel and give them their overall themes. This paper examines one of those sections.

Many who have proposed an outline of Matthew's gospel have recognized the importance of Jesus' thrice-repeated prediction of his suffering, death and resurrection in the latter part of the gospel and have labeled 16:20–20:19 as a major division.³ The fact that the prediction appears three times in the narrative not only indicates its importance for the story's plot and theology but also provides structural markers.

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² For an overview of the kinds of literary structuring techniques found in Matthew see D. R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989) 13–20. Many of these techniques are also characteristic of oral presentation; see Lohr, "Oral Techniques."

³ Thus Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure*; Combrink, "Structure"; Bauer, *Structure*. Like Kingsbury, I disagree with those (such as T. Slater, "Notes on Matthew's Structure," *JBL* 99/3 [September 1980] 436) who see 16:21 as a redactional statement by Matthew and consequently count the three predictions as 17:22–23, 20:17–19 and 26:2.

I. THE STRUCTURE OF MATT 17:22–20:19

Between the second and third predictions of the passion are various episodes, parables and sayings. A closer examination reveals that the second and third passion predictions form an inclusio and that the materials in between are arranged chiastically.

17:22–23: Jesus foretells his death

A. 17:24–27: Giving freely; money; sacrifice

Challenge

“Parable” (Who should pay taxes anyway?)

B. 18:1–7: Little children are the essence of the kingdom of heaven

C. 18:8–9: Sacrifice of the body for the sake of the kingdom

D. 18:10–14: Do not despise what God values

Parable (Lost sheep)

E. 18:15–17: What to do when a brother sins

F. 18:18–20: Agreement between heaven and earth

E’. 18:21–35: What to do when a brother sins

Parable (Unforgiving servant)

D’. 19:1–9: Do not separate what God has joined

C’. 19:10–12: Sacrifice of the body for the kingdom of heaven

B’. 19:13–15: Little children are the essence of the kingdom of heaven

A’. 19:16–20:16: Giving freely; money; sacrifice

Challenge

Parable (Laborers in the vineyard)

20:17–19: Jesus foretells his death

Chiasmus is a special type of inverted parallelism. Inverted parallelism has the pattern A B B’ A’ (with an even number of elements), but chiasmus has the pattern A B C B’ A’ (with an odd number of elements). Thus the special feature of chiasmus is that it has a single central element, which is the focus of the structure.⁴ The effect is to draw the reader (or hearer⁵) from the ends toward the middle, where the main point of the passage lies. The parallel elements that surround the central element share the same themes or even the same vocabulary.⁶ A catchword or phrase in A, for example, is likely to be repeated in A’. The parallel elements, however, may be connected thematically or conceptually without explicit verbal connections.

Chiasmus served several purposes in the literary and oral environment of antiquity. It could be used to aid memorization of oral materials,⁷ but its

⁴ See J. Breck, “Biblical Chiasmus: Exploring Structure for Meaning,” *BTB* 17/2 (April 1987) 71; A. Stock, “Chiastic Awareness and Education in Antiquity,” *BTB* 14/1 (January 1984) 23.

⁵ H. V. D. Parunak, “Oral Typesetting: Some Uses of Biblical Structure,” *Bib* 62/2 (1981) 153–168.

⁶ On suggestions for criteria by which one can identify chiasmus see D. J. Clark, “Criteria for Identifying Chiasmus,” *LB* 35 (1975) 63–72; C. L. Blomberg, “The Structure of 2 Corinthians 1–7,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1989) 3–27.

⁷ Lohr, “Oral Techniques” 425.

greater significance was to accomplish three things: (1) to impart order to a literary work,⁸ (2) to draw attention to the material at the center of the structure, which material is the key, climax, or main point of the structure,⁹ and (3) to place related materials in parallelism with each other, thus allowing them to interpret each other by way of comparison, contrast, or completion.¹⁰ It is therefore an artificial arrangement imposed by an author or redactor on his materials with the purpose of establishing relationships between units of material and showing the reader how to interpret them.

Matthew's chiasmic arrangement in 17:22–20:19 is his own creation, but it does not appear that he created it from scratch. Instead it builds on a framework common to the synoptic gospels. To this framework Matthew added materials to produce the chiasmic structure.¹¹ Therefore all or parts of sections A, E, F, E', C' and A' are peculiar to Matthew. Furthermore in constructing this part of his gospel Matthew did more than achieve a simple cut-and-paste juxtaposition of elements. There are verbal and thematic links between many of the sections. For example, "stumble" becomes a catchword that links sections A, B and C. The phrase "one of these little ones" links sections B and D. "Two or three" links sections E and F. The two parts of section A' each conclude with the chiasmic saying "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last."¹² Sections C' and B' share a similar arrangement in that both involve hard sayings and Jesus' response to others' objections. Sections A and A' are each arranged as a challenge to Jesus, to which he responds with a parable,¹³ and sections E and E' both begin with the question of what to do if your brother sins against you. There is also a balance in the overall structure: Sections A through D are generally positive in tone, and sections D' through A' are generally negative in tone. Finally, the panel E-F-E' is

⁸ Parunak, "Oral Typesetting" 155–168.

⁹ R. Man, "The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation," *BSac* 141 (April–June 1984) 146–157; Breck, "Biblical Chiasmus" 70–74; Stock, "Chiasmic Awareness" 23–27; N. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, reprint 1992) 41.

¹⁰ Stock, "Chiasmic Awareness" 23. Since chiasmus is a (special) type of parallelism (inverted), it shares the hermeneutical possibilities of ordinary (simple) parallelism. For the hermeneutics of ordinary parallelism see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985); J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University, 1981).

¹¹ In noting the framework of the material of this section that Matthew shares with Mark and/or Luke, I have followed the arrangement in K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1978). Of course to say that Matthew has added his own materials does not at all mean that he invented them. Neither redaction criticism (see S. Smalley, "Redaction Criticism," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* [ed. I. H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 181–195; G. Osborne, "The Evangelical and *Traditionsgeschichte*," *JETS* 21/2 [June 1978] 117–130) nor narrative analysis (see R. Weathers, "Leland Ryken's Literary Approach to Biblical Interpretation: An Evangelical Model," *JETS* 37/1 [March 1994] 115–124) is in a position to judge the historical reliability of a text. Whatever the source of Matthew's materials, the finished product is inspired.

¹² These two sayings are, however, stated in "opposite" ways: 19:30, "the first shall be last, and the last first"; 20:16, "the last shall be first, and the first last."

¹³ The conversation with Peter about who is liable to pay taxes (17:25–26) is not usually counted among the parables, but it is clearly a parabolic illustration.

framed by parables. In all, Matt 17:22–20:19 is a tightly constructed and symmetrically balanced passage that begs to be read as a whole.

We therefore suggest, following this structure and its implied hermeneutics, that the arrangement of materials in our text has a parenetic and didactic purpose and that the second and third passion predictions form a hermeneutical inclusio¹⁴ that sets the theological and interpretive tone for the episodes, sayings, parables, and so forth, in between. These predictions not only mark off the literary section but also determine the reader's approach to the intervening textual elements.¹⁵ Specifically, the episodes, parables and sayings are all, at their core, explanations of why Jesus is going to the cross. Secondly they are models for personal discipleship and for the relationship between disciples. The chiasmic arrangement also serves to unify this section of the gospel and to give further aid in understanding the meaning of each element.

II. INTERPRETATION

In this part of the paper I will show how the chiasmic structure of Matt 17:22–20:19 provides a key to understanding the elements that make up the passage. I propose to demonstrate the progression of theological themes that find their summary and general expression in the center of this structure, 18:18–20 (section F).

1. *A (17:24–27) and A' (19:16–20:16)*. In section A, a challenge is issued indirectly to Jesus through a question put to Peter. At issue is why Jesus does not pay the temple tax. Jesus responds with a parable-like explanation. The real lesson here, however, is found in the subsequent order to Peter to go to the sea and retrieve the fish with a coin in its mouth. As the Son of God, Jesus is rightly exempt from paying the temple tax.¹⁶ But he will do it anyway in order to avoid causing others to stumble. That is, he will sacrifice his privilege for the sake of others, and this is also exactly why he will go to the cross (cf. Phil 2:5–8).

In section A' we have an example of someone who was unwilling to make such a sacrifice. Like section A, this section begins with a challenge issued

¹⁴ Parunak ("Oral Typesetting" 158 n. 9) terms an inclusio such as the one here an external inclusio, because these elements are part of the context of the material included within the chiasmus but not part of the included material itself. An internal inclusio is one that is an integral part of the paragraph it defines.

¹⁵ Inclusio, as well as chiasmus, is frequent enough in Matthew (J. C. Fenton, "Inclusio and Chiasmus in Matthew," TU 73 [ed. Gebhart and Harnack; 1959] 174–179). I am arguing that here these framing passages also signal the theological/hermeneutical agenda.

¹⁶ Jesus is the King's Son, and the sons of the kingdom are Jesus and his disciples (not just Jesus and Peter). Whether the tax here was a civil tax (R. Cassidy, "Matthew 17:24–27—A Word on Civil Taxes," *CBQ* 41/4 [October 1979] 571–580) or a religious tax (N. McEleney, "Mt 17:24–27—Who Paid the Temple Tax?," *CBQ* 38/2 [April 1976] 178–192) makes little difference as far as the point of the story is concerned. The analogy between Jesus and the disciples on the one hand and the sons of the story on the other hand is a general one.

to Jesus. The rich young ruler eagerly wants Jesus to commend him, and his words are a challenge for Jesus to find any fault. But the rich man stumbles at exactly the point where Jesus succeeds. Whereas Jesus is humble and able to sacrifice his “riches” for others, the rich man is selfish and thus cannot find it within himself to give up his riches for the poor. This section, however, adds two other dimensions to the discussion:¹⁷ (1) the relevance of the episodes to personal discipleship, and (2) the glory that comes as a reward for sacrifice. Like Jesus, and unlike the rich man, the disciples have sacrificed riches for the kingdom of heaven. As a result they will receive great honor and eternal life. A paradox is thus highlighted: The way of sacrifice and selflessness is the way to abundance and glory; the way of loss is the way to gain. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard that immediately follows, however, tempers our understanding of this concept. Reward in the kingdom is not a matter of piling up a great number of meritorious sacrificial works. It is a matter of grace.

2. *B (18:1–7) and B' (19:13–15)*. Section B picks up on the idea of humility implicit in section A and formally introduces the paradox that is also discussed in section A'. That the disciples are arguing about who is greatest among them shows that they have yet to understand that paradox and the humility that is at its core, and their failure to understand is why they are distressed when Jesus speaks about his impending death (17:23). But we must also note that the discussion of the disciples is about rank in the kingdom. The narrative's move to a kingdom discussion shows us that Matthew understood the death of Jesus to be his kingdom work. Jesus will achieve the greatest glory in the kingdom because he will exhibit the greatest humility by his death on the cross, and the childlike humility Jesus will demonstrate by the cross is the very humility he here requires of the disciples.

The children in this section then become a symbol of believers (18:5–6) and a locus of fellowship with Jesus himself. At this point another major theme is formally introduced: the significance of a disciple's relationship with his brethren.¹⁸ The text turns to say that a disciple's relationship with his brethren is intimately tied to his relationship with Jesus. Specifically, like Jesus (in section A) they must, by an exercise of humility and self-sacrifice, avoid scandalizing (in the Greek sense) even one of these “little ones” (18:5). The humility that brings greatness in the kingdom must be manifested among the disciples in a selfless concern for each other.

In section B' the disciples' failure to see the little children as a symbol of humility shows itself by their attempt to prevent the children from coming to Jesus. Jesus again reinforces the lesson on humility from section B. The role of these little ones, these symbols of believers, as a locus of fellowship

¹⁷ In this way the parallelism between A and A' is of the type so common in Hebrew poetry, in which the second member advances the thought of the first. See Alter, *Art*; Kugel, *Idea*.

¹⁸ That the humility of section B is immediately about the disciples' relations with one another is hinted at by the fact that the teaching on humility was given in response to a quarrel among the disciples.

with Jesus himself is further heightened as Jesus lays his hands on them (19:15).

3. *C (18:8–9) and C' (19:10–12)*. Section C picks up on the ideas of sacrifice and the avoidance of scandal, but now the application is to a disciple's disposition toward himself, to personal discipleship. The drastic nature of the sayings here emphasizes the warning against stumbling but further introduces another idea: that of willing and radical personal sacrifice. Again this quality, which is required for successful discipleship, is also what will enable Jesus to go to the cross so freely.

Section C' follows the dialogue with the Pharisees concerning divorce but still illustrates the radical nature of Christian sacrifice. The kind of self-discipline inherent in Jesus' teaching about divorce is indeed a hard saying,¹⁹ but it is a sacrifice for the kingdom and thus follows the paradigm laid down by Jesus himself.

4. *D (18:10–14) and D' (19:1–9)*. The discussion now returns to the disciples' treatment of one another. These sections introduce another important element in the theology of this part of the gospel—namely, that a disciple's interests, values, outlooks, goals, and so on must match those of God in heaven. The interests of heaven must be duplicated in the interests of the disciples on earth. Specifically, the relationship between God and disciple becomes the model for the relationship between disciple and disciple. In section D this is presented as the need for a disciple to have the same concern for the "little ones" that God himself, and the Son of Man,²⁰ has. If God so values them, the disciples must not despise them. This correspondence between heaven and earth is indicated by the mention of the so-called guardian angels, and the parable of the lost sheep, which immediately follows, reinforces the point. God is so concerned about these little ones that the loss of just one of them is too much. At personal risk he goes out to retrieve the lost one, and this same concern must be exhibited by the disciples toward one another.

In section D' we see the antithesis to the principle laid down in section D. The Pharisees, by their loose approach to divorce, are an example of those whose interests and concerns do not match those of God in heaven. They have loosed where God has bound. Whereas God "from the beginning" emphasized the binding nature of marriage and conceded divorce only reluctantly, the Pharisees have emphasized the separation, thus deemphasizing the unity inherent in the marriage relationship.²¹ This is why Jesus rejects the rabbinic debate altogether: because it centers around the wrong point and ul-

¹⁹ In the gospels a hard saying is not just one that is intellectually difficult. It can also be one that is hard to obey (cf. John 6:60).

²⁰ According to the variant reading in 18:11.

²¹ The fixed nature of God's design for marriage is emphasized by the perfect tense of *ginomai* here and sets the Pharisaic emphasis on divorce in even greater relief.

timately fails to value that aspect of the marriage relationship that God values.²²

5. *E (18:15–17) and E' (18:21–35)*. When we read the well-known passage on church discipline (section E) in this context, we find that it is not primarily about the church but continues the idea that disciples are to show concern for each other. Yet another principle is thrown into the discussion here, however: that of the primacy of forgiveness. The concern of one disciple for another is to be a specific concern for forgiveness and restoration of fellowship. A right relationship between disciples is a relationship characterized and maintained by forgiveness and reconciliation, and the importance of pursuing this reconciliation is emphasized by outlining the great extent to which the effort to regain a brother must go. Just as God's greatest concern is to regain those whose sin has separated themselves from him (cf. Isa 59:1–2), and just as he goes to great extents to retrieve them (as illustrated in the parable of the lost sheep, immediately preceding this section), so must it be between disciples. So important is the fixing of a sin-damaged relationship between disciples that a disciple's effort to regain his brother must encompass ever-widening sources of help. Eventually a disciple must enlist the help of the whole church in the effort to regain the one brother.

Parallel to this is section E' in which the main character of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard stands in stark contrast to the picture of undefeatable forgiveness presented in section E. The wicked servant refuses to forgive others. What makes his action so heinous is that he was himself the object of much forgiveness from his master. His master rebukes him severely for not showing to others the same kind of forgiveness he himself received—that is, the master's forgiveness was to be the servant's model in treating his fellow servants. Now the master is God, and the servants are disciples, and again there must be a correspondence between the two, between heaven and earth. Just as the servant was to forgive as his master had forgiven him, a disciple must forgive his brethren just as God has forgiven him. A disciple must be as eager and ready to forgive, and as active in pursuing that forgiveness, as God himself. The terrible judgment on the wicked servant and its pointed application in 18:35 underscores the great importance of forgiveness in the sight of God.

In these sections the idea of humility, sacrifice of self, and a correspondence between heaven and earth all combine to highlight the necessity of forgiveness in the relationships between disciples. Forgiveness requires selflessness, a willingness to make a radical personal sacrifice in going far beyond the ordinary bounds of forgiveness (the “seventy times seven”), and is, above all, what God does for the sinner. As we have suggested, however, there is more to it than this. These sections also explain to us Jesus' death. Specifically it is because of the divine interest in the lost,²³ God's eagerness

²² The rabbinic debate on divorce is summarized in E. Schürer *et al.*, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2.485–486.

to reconcile, and a limitless pursuit of forgiveness that Jesus will go to the cross and sacrifice his life in humble submission to the will of the Father in heaven.

6. *F (18:18–20)*. At the center of a chiasmus there often stands a climax, whether it be a change in the trend of thought, an antithetic idea, a shift, or a statement of a general principle or truth.²⁴ Thus, as we read this text from the outside toward the middle, there is a crescendo effect. The various theological themes pile up on top of each other until we come to this section. We therefore suggest that the sayings in vv. 18–20 are to be interpreted in light of the theological development we have noticed in the sections that surround this one. The structure of this passage obliges us to do so. This means that these statements in some way have to do ultimately with the death of Christ and also with personal discipleship and the relationship between disciples, a relationship that is patterned after the theological themes we have thus far encountered.

There has been much discussion as to the specific referents of the binding and loosing of which Jesus speaks in 18:18.²⁵ According to the method of reading this text that we have here proposed, however, the verse is a broad and sweeping statement on how every facet of discipleship must follow divine precedent. In other words, discipleship demands that there must be a correspondence between heaven and earth in all things. The quick repetition of “upon the earth” and “in heaven” drives this point home. It is the job of a disciple to see to it that he does as God does, that the will of the Father in heaven is carried out on this earth.²⁶ As Julius R. Mantey has pointed out, this saying therefore limits what the disciples could do. Jesus commanded them

to ratify and obey God’s decrees. This passage does not teach that God concurs in men’s conclusions; but rather it teaches that those who live in accordance with Christ’s directions will decide to do just what God has already decided should be done.²⁷

This is therefore a general statement with the force of a command that summarizes and enjoins the theme of heaven-earth correspondence, a theme that

²³ In this way Matthew’s use of the parable of the lost sheep is much like Luke’s. In Luke 15 the parable is presented to explain why Jesus associates with sinners (Gentiles, outsiders). It says that he associates with the lost because that is the will and concern of God, the shepherd. In Matthew’s context the parable is applied to the relationship between Christians, but the reason for pursuing the reconciliation is the same.

²⁴ Lund, *Chiasmus* 41; Man, “Value”; Stock, “Chiastic Awareness”; Breck, “Biblical Chiasmus.”

²⁵ For a survey of scholarly opinion on Matt 18:18 see D. Duling, “Binding and Loosing,” *Forum* 3/4 (December 1987) 3–31.

²⁶ See Matt 6:10; 26:39–42.

²⁷ J. R. Mantey, “The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20 23, Mt 16 19, and Mt 18 18,” *JBL* 58 (1939) 246. The future perfect passive should not be translated into English as a simple future passive (“will be bound, will be loosed”), for this makes the verse say the very opposite in English of what it says in the Greek (J. R. Mantey, “Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18–19 and 18:18,” *RevExp* 78 [1981] 409–416).

has been given specific treatment in the sections surrounding this one. It includes the specific brotherly concern already discussed, and it also provides the main reason for Jesus' death.

Matthew 18:19 completes the idea of the heaven-earth correspondence by promising answers from heaven for the requests made by disciples in unity on earth. Just as the will of the Father in heaven must be carried out by the disciples on earth, and just as the heavenly concern for the lost and interest in reconciliation must be manifested in the disciples' treatment of each other, so the request of disciples bound in unity on earth will be granted by the Father in heaven. The correspondence between heaven and earth thus comes full circle.

Matthew 18:20 provides the summary statement for another of the themes we have seen in this passage, that of the intimate connection between a disciple's relationship with his brethren and his relationship with Christ. Christian fellowship always involves three parties: a disciple, his brother (or brethren), and Christ. Just as to receive a brother in Christ's name is to receive Christ himself (18:6), so also to stand in unity with a brother in Christ's name is to have the added fellowship of Christ. To be united with a brother in reconciliation is also to be united with Christ.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This study raises several issues concerning the larger structure and theology of Matthew's gospel and concerning the interpretation of any Biblical text that is so tightly constructed. I can touch upon these issues only briefly here.

(1) The unity of this section of the gospel would argue against any structural scheme that begins a new section of the gospel with 19:1.²⁸ Indeed it is clear that a careful study of the smaller sections in the gospel should determine the gospel's overall structure and not vice versa. In the search for the structure of Matthew's gospel we must develop literary strategies that are faithful to the text.

(2) If, as we have suggested, each of the elements in this section of the gospel is ultimately an explanation of Jesus' death, then the theme of the suffering servant in Matthew's Christology is highlighted in an even stronger way than we might suspect at first.²⁹ Indeed this text shows us that the Son of God serves God by fulfilling on earth the divine will from heaven, which service entails his humble, personal and radical sacrifice for the sake of the divine interest in reconciliation.

²⁸ As is the case in those schemes that arrange Matthew's gospel along geographical lines (see n. 1 *supra*) or those that argue that Matthew's gospel is patterned after the five books of the Law (following B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* [London: Constable, 1930]).

²⁹ See Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure*; Bauer, *Structure*. D. Hill ("Son and Servant: An Essay on Matthean Christology," *JSNT* 6 [1980] 2–16) summarizes well when he says that "the servant theme gives the necessary content to Matthew's 'Son of God' Christology" (p. 15).

(3) This approach also sheds light on Jesus' role as teacher in the gospel. Instead of thinking of Jesus' teaching primarily in terms of the major discourses, we also see a Jesus who turned the episodes on the way to Jerusalem into prophetic object lessons that centered around his own impending death and that resounded essential themes in discipleship.

(4) While this section of the gospel is often noted for its strong ecclesiastical interest, this study suggests that our understanding of that interest should be informed by an even greater interest in the death of Christ. His death as here portrayed provides the model for the conduct of the church³⁰ and breathes fresh meaning into the job of preaching Jesus and him crucified and of taking up the cross to follow him.

(5) If our treatment of this passage has been fair and accurate, then it behooves us to pay the same kind of attention to literary structure in every part of the Bible. While the authors of Scripture are not here to tell us how

³⁰ The findings of this paper coincide with Carter's observation: "The satellites maintain the focus on Jesus' death and resurrection, and draw out the implications of being a disciple of the crucified Jesus" ("Kernels" 478).

to interpret the writings they left us, by carefully structuring their materials they have handed us the keys of interpretation. If we are committed to letting the text speak for itself, then we must not only be students of grammar and history but also of literary structure, for it is by the latter of these three that the Biblical writers often show us how to read the text.