

# Introduction to the Chiastic Approach

Excerpt from:  
**Joshua's  
Spiritual Warfare**



## Understanding the Chiasms of Joshua

Copyright © 2008 Thomas B. Clarke

Bible Discernments  
Publishing Division of Prayer Gardeners  
Syracuse, NY USA

[www.Bible-Discernments.com](http://www.Bible-Discernments.com)

Permission granted to copy or distribute this excerpt as needed

## ***Introduction to the Chiastic Approach***

The structure of the Book of Joshua indicates a far deeper meaning than surface descriptions of battles and accounts of the wonders of God. I invite you to join me in analyzing its writing style using what is called the **chiastic** (ky'-az-tic) **approach**. As we do so, we will see a much deeper meaning than a number of victories through the hand of God. Also, we will see principles for dealing with our daily spiritual battles.

Many people are not familiar with the **chiastic approach**, so this chapter is set aside to help with that understanding. We will start by looking at an example from the Book of Mark that illustrates the chiastic approach. In terms of background, we will then identify when this writing style was first identified. Next, we will look at some chiasms from the Gospels, showing how to identify chiasms and apply them to our overall scriptural usage. Finally, we will look at two other literary styles that are used in Joshua: parallelism and repetition.

In total, this book identifies sixty-seven chiasms which are found in the Book of Joshua. In Parts Two and Three of this book, we will look at the Book of Joshua to reveal these chiasms and the application of the spiritual warfare through the **chiastic approach**.

### **Illustration of the Chiastic Approach**

As we begin to understand the chiastic approach, let us first look at how a familiar set of passages from Mark 11:12-21 are structured:

<b>Verses</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Theme</b>
12-14	A	Jesus takes authority over a fig tree by cursing it
15,16	B	Jesus takes authority over merchandisers at temple
17a	C	My house will be a house of prayer for all nations
17b	C'	You have made my house into a den of robbers
18,19	B'	Jewish leaders are loosing their authority
20,21	A'	Disciples recognize Jesus' authority in the withered fig tree

Some theologians refer to the structure of the above verses as an example of a "chiasm" or "chiasmus." A few people refer to it as "inverted parallelism." Others use the term "symmetric parallelism." For the purposes of this book, I will use the term **chiasm** (ky'-az-um). This structured style of writing is called the "chiastic approach."

**It is a premise of this book that by analyzing the chiasms of the Book of Joshua, we can uncover key principles of spiritual warfare.**

Each chiasm is a repetition of phrases starting at the outside and going in. Look at the similarity of the verses on the previous page: A goes with A', B goes with B', and C goes with C'. The fig tree is the commonality in both vv. 12-14 and in vv. 20,21 (A – A' level), and Jesus shows his authority over the fig tree in these verses. Jesus took authority over the merchandising at the temple in vv. 15,16, and the Jewish leaders realized that Jesus was threatening their authority in vv. 18,19 (B – B' level). The bottom and most important set of verses (v. 17a,b) contrasts how the temple should have been and how the temple had become (C – C' level).

Possibly this chart will help show the structure:

Level	First presentation	Inversion	Theme
A - A'	Jesus takes authority over a fig tree by cursing it (Mark 11:12-14)	Disciples recognize Jesus' authority in the withered fig tree (Mark 11:20,21)	Fig tree is cursed and it is withered, representing Jesus' authority
B - B'	Jesus takes authority over merchandisers at temple (Mark 11:15,16)	Jewish leaders are loosing their authority (Mark 11:18,19)	Authority is taken and authority is given up
C - C'	My house will be a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17a)	You have made my house into a den of robbers (Mark 11:17b)	Contrasting views of the temple

When reading this chiasm, the verses under **First presentation** are to be read from top to bottom, while the verses under **Inversion** are to be read from bottom to top. This is done so that the pairs on each **Level** can be placed together, and then a **Theme** is assigned to each level.

While other experts on the chiastic approach use the style shown on page 23, I prefer to think of chiasms in this chart form. I find that by clearly stating the theme at each level, there is greater clarification of what the Lord is saying to us. This chart format is therefore used throughout the remainder of this book.

Most of the people that have studied the chiastic approach agree that the verses in the center contain the most important part of the chiasm. The chart above shows that bottom row, which is Mark 11:17 (C – C' level), is the center between Mark 11:12 and Mark 11:22. In this book, the bottom row is the center of the chiasm; it is called the **center point**.

Look with me to see why verse 17 is the center point. The phrase "a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17a) is a reference to the same phrase in Isaiah 56:1-8, and the "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17b) is a reference to Jeremiah 7:1-11. Some of the verses from Isaiah read:

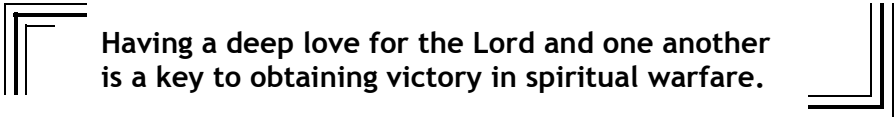
*This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right ... love the name of the LORD and worship him" (Is 56:1,4).*

Likewise, the Lord spoke these words through the prophet Jeremiah:

*"If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place" (Jer 7:5-7).*

The common theme of these verses from Isaiah and Jeremiah is loving the Lord and treating one another justly. Therefore, when considered together, we see that Jesus took authority over the fig tree and the temple because of the injustices that people committed to the Lord and to one another. In other words, the love for the Lord and the love for one another were far from what was required.

As stated earlier, by looking for chiasms and finding the center point, we can derive a far deeper meaning of the Bible and apply it to spiritual warfare. This chiasm applies to all people, not just the Jews at the temple – having love for the Lord and for one another is a key to obtaining victory in spiritual warfare.



**Having a deep love for the Lord and one another is a key to obtaining victory in spiritual warfare.**

## **Background on the Chiasm**

Several European publications in the 1700's and 1800's discussed the symmetric arrangement of Scripture, the most notable being John Jebb and Thomas Boys.<sup>9, 10</sup> However, it was not until the 1920's that Nils

---

<sup>9</sup> John Jebb, *Sacred Literature* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1820).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Boys, *Tactica Sacra* (London: Hamilton, 1824).

Lund published articles about the chiasm in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1980's, there has been an increasing interest in the chiastic approach.

One of the most comprehensive reviews of this writing style was prepared by Dr. David Dorsey in 1999.<sup>12</sup> In that book, Dorsey studies the structure and meaning of each Old Testament book using this chiastic approach. Dorsey found that the chiastic approach is particularly frequent in Genesis, but he shows examples from every book in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Bible scholars have also found examples of the chiastic approach in every book, but some books are more known for it than others. I personally find that the chiastic approach appears frequently in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John.

The word chiasmus (ky-as-mus) is derived from the Greek word  $\chi\lambda\alpha\sigma\mu\upsilon\sigma$ , where the first letter  $\chi$  (chi) is indicative of a cross. Chiasmus literally means "placing crosswise, diagonal arrangement."<sup>13</sup> Wade White gives this simple definition: "chiasmus is the reversal of elements in otherwise parallel phrases."<sup>14</sup> Simply put, each chiasm is a structured repetition of themes starting at the outside and moving to the center.

Many attempts have been made to define and redefine chiasms over the years: some see a very simple structure while others provide a wide number of exceptions that becomes very inclusive. In this book, we will see that a chiasm achieves its importance when the central point provides profound insight into the verses; therefore, I generally focus on those with a more simple structure. Where the chiasm has been identified, the center point often gives clarity and understanding of the full intent of these Scriptures either by revealing what is otherwise hidden or by adding particular emphasis.

Within the Book of Joshua, Bible scholars typically focus on the use of the chiasms in chapters 2 and 22. On the World Wide Web, for example, it is very difficult to find sites where chiasms are identified in other parts of the Book of Joshua. Similarly, I have not found any association of chiasms with spiritual warfare on the Internet. Someone

---

<sup>11</sup> Nils W. Lund, "The Presence of Chiasmus in the Old Testament", *American Journal for Semitic Languages* 46, 1929-30.

<sup>12</sup> David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis – Malachi*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Wade Albert White, *Rhetorical Criticism and Zechariah: Analysis of a Methodology for Determining Chiastic Structures in Biblical Hebrew Texts*, (M.A. thesis, Acadia University, 1999), 6.

may have written about it, but as of the writing of this book, it simply does not stand out.

**This writing attempts to add to the general understanding of the chiastic approach, namely that the center point of a chiasm can often be applied to the battle known as spiritual warfare. This is particularly true in the Book of Joshua.** It is my hope that each of us will come to a new level of understanding with regard to spiritual warfare. We will study how to recognize these chiastic patterns for ourselves so that as we read other books of the Bible, the Lord can speak to us in a new way. Oh the joy of discovering God's word for today!

## **The Art of Identifying Chiasms**

In the example of the chiasm that is on page 24, three levels are identified. Some chiasms have been identified with just two levels, while others have been known to have eight or more levels. Some are very straight forward and therefore obvious; some are surprisingly complex and not easily found.

Chiasms can appear in a linear style (that is, one ends and another one begins), and there can be long gaps between chiasms. There can be one long chiasm with smaller chiasms within the larger one, and there can be overlapping chiasms where one begins before the previous one ends. As an example of the long chiasm with smaller chiasms, Dr. Dorsey points out that the Book of Jeremiah is one long chiasm from chapters 1 - 51 with four levels. The D level (Jeremiah 30 - 33) is the center point, which is a message of hope. Yet Jeremiah 30 - 33 is itself a chiasm with two levels, and Jeremiah 32:1-44 is the center point of that smaller chiasm.<sup>15</sup>

The art of identifying chiasms is still quite new and is somewhat subjective. There is nothing within the Bible that says that the A level starts at a certain point. The A-B-C-C'-B'-A' structure is a nomenclature that was developed by modern day Bible scholars. As such, errors of interpretation can appear. That is why it is important to have discernment regarding the identification and applications of chiasms.

One of my purposes in writing this book is that you will look for chiasms as you read the Bible. As you find them, allow the Lord to speak to you about how to apply each chiasm in regard to spiritual warfare. I only hope that you receive a word from the Lord in confirmation and application of what you believe you are seeing.

---

<sup>15</sup> Dorsey, 236-245.

## Examples of the Chiastic Approach

All chiasms start with an outer level and move towards an inner level. At the center point, there can be either one verse or it could be repeated using similar words. Each level has its own theme, although the themes can be related. Let's look at a few chiasms.

### • First example

I first became aware of chiasms by looking at the footnotes regarding Isaiah 6:10 in my *NIV Study Bible*. In the parallel verses from Matthew 13:15, see if you can identify the levels:

*For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts ...*

Let us identify the nouns. They are as follows:

- People
- Heart
- Ears
- Eyes
- Eyes
- Ears
- Hearts

Did you see the three levels of the chiasm? With the exception of the word "people," they all have pairs. Did you see the center point? I sense that this verse is speaking about spiritual blindness. What about you?

Here then is the presentation of this first example:

Level	First presentation	Inversion	Theme
A - A'	Hearts are calloused (Matt 13:15a)	Hearts do not understand (Matt 13:15f)	Calloused hearts
B - B'	Ears hardly hear (Matt 13:15b)	Ears do not hear (Matt 13:15e)	Never listening ears
C - C'	Eyes are closed (Matt 13:15c)	Eyes do not see (Matt 13:15d)	Never perceiving eyes

- **Second Example**

In our next example, we look at Matthew 6:24:

*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.*

In this case, it is not just the nouns that identify the levels of the chiasm. I find that frequently I must identify the verbs to see if there is a chiastic pairing:

Level	First presentation	Inversion	Theme
A - A'	Two masters (Matt 6:24a)	God and money (Matt 6:24c)	One master or the other
B - B'	Hate the one (Matt 6:24b)	Despise the other (Matt 6:24b)	Hatred and despising
C - C'	Love the other (Matt 6:24b)	Be devoted to one (Matt 6:24b)	Love and devotion

In this chiasm, we go from identification of the two masters (A – A' level), to hatred (which we should not do) on the B – B' level, to loving (which we should do) on the C – C' level. The center point is about loving the right master: we are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and with all of our mind and with all of our strength. When we do that, the choice between God and money becomes a moot question.

Therefore, this verse is not as much about the choice between God and money as it is in about winning the spiritual battle because we love the Lord that much. When we truly love the Lord, the second master named Money is no longer the focus of our lives.

- **Third Example**

The story of the transfiguration should be familiar to most Christians. Let's look at how the chiasm appears in Mark 9:2-9.

In the chiasm shown below, notice the similarity of Mark 9:2a and Mark 9:9. First they're going up the mountain and then going down the mountain. That is the A – A' level, which is the outer most point of the chiasm and presumably the least important.

The B – B' level is the transfiguration: first Christ is changed from human to a whiter than bleached form (Mark 9:2b-4), and then He is changed back to human form (Mark 9:8). At the same time, Elijah and Moses are changed from invisible to visible, and then are changed back to invisible in the B' portion.

Level	First presentation	Inversion	Theme
A - A'	The four go up a high mountain (Mark 9:2a)	The four go down the mountain (Mark 9:9)	Up and down the mountain
B - B'	Jesus was transfigured, and Elijah and Moses appear (Mark 9:2b-4)	Elijah and Moses disappear, and by inference, Jesus is returned to human form (Mark 9:8)	Transfiguration with the presence of Elijah and Moses
C	Listen to my Son who I love (Mark 9:7)	No inverted verse	Listening to Christ is emphasized

In this chiasm, there is a C level rather than a C – C' level. Most experts in the chiastic approach agree that the center point can be just the one point without an inverse. On the other hand, you could have broken Mark 9:7 into two parts (God's voice comes out of the cloud *and* Listen to Christ's voice), which would create a C and C' level. You would not be wrong either way. Therefore, to identify this as an A-B-C-B'-A' structure is equally correct as stating it is an A-B-C-C'-B'-A' structure.

This C – C' level is where the Lord is trying to draw our attention. He is asking us to be active in listening to what Christ says (Mark 9:7b). This, according to the chiasm, is the most important point and is the emphasis.

What is it about our modern knowledge-centered society? Are you like me in that you were in such awe over the transfiguration that you missed God's emphasis on listening to Christ? Yes I read it, and yes I understood it, but I missed the emphasis on listening to the voice of the Lord until I saw this as a chiasm. The chiasm is so simple yet so profound. On the C level, God is telling us to have an active relationship with Christ; to have spiritual discernment; to be filled with words of wisdom and knowledge; and to have the word of the Lord active in our lives. This, of course, is essential for spiritual warfare.

## Identifying Chiasms

Below are some other chiasms to see if you can identify the center points. If you can, not only identify the chiastic structure, but also try to state the principle as it applies to spiritual warfare. The principle should be based on the center point of the chiasm.

John 1:45-49

John 2:3-9

John 2:23 - 3:2

Sometimes the center point is hard to find, while other times it is relatively easy. You might be upset with me over this (is there a spirit of frustration??), but I have chosen not to provide the answers to these chiasms. It is my hope that by attempting this yourself, you will develop this ability on your own.

Here is one technique that I have found helpful in identifying chiasms. When you see a verse repeated or with a very similar thought, you might suspect a chiasm. Count the number of verses between the first and last verse. You can often find the center point by counting half of that number from the first verse. So, if there are 24 verses from the beginning to the end, count 12 verses from the beginning. Although some chiasms can really fool you, that would be a place to start looking for similar themes.

Another technique in identifying chiasms is to identify two verses, one right after the other, that say essentially the same thing. You might suspect that you are looking at the center point of a chiasm. Using this as the center point, look at the thought that was presented in the previous verse or paragraph and in the following verse or paragraph. If they are the same or are similar, you may be reading a chiasm.

Here are two more chiasms to try for yourself:

John 6:35-48

John 17:1-5

## **Applying Chiasms**

I recently wrote a letter to my mom based on John 20:10-16 which is another chiasm. I noticed the chiasm because the words "*Woman, why are you crying?*" are presented in both John 20:13 and John 20:15. From there my eyes went to John 20:10,11 where Mary was crying outside the tomb, and John 20:16 where Mary cried out "*Rabboni!*" (Can you see the entire chiasm?) I did not want to mention the chiastic approach to my mom because it would distract from the message. Instead I pointed out how Mary changed from weeping (John 20:10) to joy (John 20:16) in a matter of seven verses, and then asked her "What changed?" You see, what changed is the center point of this chiasm.

My thought provoking question was followed by this statement: "As we approach Resurrection Sunday, I pray that you will see Jesus for who He truly is." It was that simple. The chiastic approach does not have to be presented in a complicated manner as is done in this book. Instead, it can be bundled in such a way that the center point becomes the focus of our attention. The purpose of understanding the chiasm should be to understand what we are to concentrate on, particularly when spiritual warfare is involved.

As another example, imagine you are a pastor or a home church leader preparing a message, and the Lord has led you to John 6:35-48. The verses start out with "*I am the bread of life,*" and they finish where they started in John 6:48 with the same words. There are fourteen verses so you find that seven verses down from John 6:35 is "*I am the bread that came down from heaven*" (John 6:41), which is similar to the next verse: "*I came down from heaven.*" You also see that John 6:41a and John 6:43 discuss how the Jews were grumbling. (Can you see the entire chiasm?)

So as a church leader, you could ask and seek the Lord about which level seems appropriate at this time. (Remember, all of these levels are appropriate for a message because they are all based on the Word of God). Do you believe you should stay at the A – A' level and discuss Jesus as the bread of life and manna? Do you think you should move to the B – B' level in John 6:37-40 and again in John 6:44-47, discussing how to attain everlasting life? Is the Lord prompting you to discuss grumbling from John 6:41a and John 6:43 (C – C' level)? Lastly, you could focus on the center point of this chiasm, where Jesus is the bread of life from heaven (D – D' level).

Some people may choose to mix and match the various levels of this chiasm, or combine it with other Scriptures. But I hope and trust that you will see how to use this rhetorical device. The chiasmic approach can add to your toolbox a whole new approach to understanding and presenting the Word of God.

## **Parallelism**

In addition to the frequent use of the chiasmic approach in the Book of Joshua, there are two additional writing styles that are noteworthy: parallelism and repetition.

Parallelism is a rhetorical style that is often applied to poetry but can be applied to prose as well. In the Bible, parallelism can be seen where pairs of topics contrast with, are similar to or compliment one another. For example, in Exodus 23:20-28, the angel helps bring in the good while the hornet helps remove the evil, as we will discuss on page 91. The difference between a chiasm and parallelism is that the chiasm is structured towards a central theme, whereas with parallelism, objects seem to stand alone for the sake of comparison by themselves. The comparison or contrast between one parallel object can help to understand the other parallel object:

- **Antithetical parallelism** – derived from the word 'antithesis', these are opposing or contrasting topics. An example would be

the comparison of light and darkness: "*God is **light**; in him there is no **darkness** at all*" (1 John 1:5).

- **Synonymous parallelism** – derived from the word 'synonym', these are similar topics. An example is the righteous person in Isaiah: "*You will be a crown of splendor in the **LORD's hand**, a royal diadem in the **hand of your God***" (Isa 62:3).
- **Synthetic parallelism** – based on the root word 'synthesis', the first set of words are expanded and completed with the second set of words. In these verses: "*I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country – to the Great Sea on the west*" (Josh 1:3,4), the second sentence explains and completes the first sentence.

Sometimes chiasms add synthetic parallelism for increased emphasis. Many of the chiasms that are found in the Book of John have this form. In these instances, the first part of the synthetic parallelism is the chiasm, and the second part is prose that complements or emphasizes the point of the chiasm. For example, consider these verses from John 13:31,32:

Level	First presentation	Inversion	Theme
A - A'	<i>"Now is the Son of Man glorified"</i> (John 13:31a)	<i>"God will glorify the Son in himself"</i> (John 13:32b)	The Son of God is glorified
B - B'	<i>"God is glorified in him"</i> (John 13:31b)	<i>"If God is glorified in him"</i> (John 13:32a)	God is glorified in Christ

The chiasm above is the first part of the synthetic parallelism. The second part is the remainder of the sentence: "*and will glorify him at once*" (John 13:32c). In this way, the emphasis is placed on the immediacy of the glory of God to be revealed in Christ – verse 13:32c expands and completes the statements in the chiasm.

## Repetition

The last writing style to be mentioned is repetition – it is the most easily understood of the writing styles. For example, there are the seven woes in Matthew 23:13-32. We will see an exceptional amount of repetition in Joshua 6, where the Hebrew words for city, trumpets, ark and encircle appear numerous times.

Repetition is also used for the sake of emphasis. Can you recall times from your childhood where this was used? Repeatedly, my mother

told me "Tommy, get that dog out of your bedroom." After a while (a long while I might add), I stopped bringing our brown-haired little dachshund into my bedroom. Why? Repetition taught me that this was very important to my mother.