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CRITICAL ISSUES
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How Are We to Read the Scriptures?

LITERARY CRITICISM OF THE BIBLE seems to be an area best left to the specialists. Yet virtually anyone can learn certain principles that governed the writing of biblical passages, and this insight can lead to a much greater appreciation of the meaning of Scripture. It can help us to read the Scriptures in a new and fresh way that corresponds to the way they were in fact written.

Ancient Hebrews and other peoples of antiquity tended to write in poetic fashion, setting two lines together which we can term “A” and “B.” Thus Psalm 112:1,

(A) Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, /
(B) who greatly delights in His commandments. //

Note that the second line takes up the theme of the first line, “paralleling” it yet intensifying or fulfilling it by specifying just how one “fears the Lord”: by taking great delight in obeying His Law. There is a movement from A to B, such that B completes, intensifies, or fulfills A.

Much of the Bible and other literary works as well were written according to a more complicated form of this pattern, called “chiasmus,” or concentric parallelism. (The term “chiasmus” is derived from the Greek letter “chi,” written like a capital X, implying a crossing or reversal of terms, as in “The *first* shall be *last* / the *last* shall

be *first*.”) The author of an individual biblical passage or entire book develops his thought, as we would expect, from beginning to end. Yet he conveys meaning as well by creating a concentric movement from the extremities of the passage toward its center. The movement, again, is one of intensification, completion or fulfillment, beginning with the first and last lines, then progressing toward the middle.

Occasionally that middle may contain more than one element. An example is the pattern A:B:B':A', in which the major “point” or center of meaning is expressed by B:B'. For example, Matthew 11:27–28 (the indentation facilitates a reading of the lines that parallel one another),

A : *All things* have been *delivered* to me by my Father;
B : and no one knows the *Son* except the *Father*,
B' : and no one knows the *Father* except the *Son*,
A' : and *all those* to whom the Son chooses to *reveal* Him.

In A', “all things” of A has been heightened and specified by “all those (people),” just as “delivered” has been heightened by “reveal.” The main focus, however, is B:B', the reciprocal knowledge of Father and Son; and particular stress is upon B', the fact that only the Son knows God the Father. This “Johannine thunderbolt” in the Synoptic tradition serves to make the point repeatedly made in the Fourth Gospel: we can know God only through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Another good example is 1 John 1:6–7, a text that expresses antithesis between those who falsely claim to be in communion with God and those who, by virtue of their moral conduct, are truly in communion both with God and with each other.

A : If we say we have *fellowship* with Him
B : and (yet) walk in the *darkness*,
C : we lie and do not do the truth.
B' : If we walk in the *light* as He is in the light,
A' : we have *fellowship* with one another. . . .