



# The Significance of Chiasm as a Structuring Device in the Hebrew Bible

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## INTRODUCTION

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century viewed Scripture as the essential source for all church teachings and doctrines: *sola scriptura*! Indeed, the idea of expressing theological concepts in terms of the phrase “*sola X*” (by X alone) arose from the theological priorities of these early reformers. While the individual principles they advocated appear in their writings, expressing these ideas in the form of a list of five *solae* (or five “*solas*”)—*sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo gloria*—was a post-Reformation development. In his study of the Decalogue, Mark Throntveit has applied an extension of the *sola X* concept to his argument that the structure of a text is essential to determining its meaning: *sola structurala*!<sup>1</sup> In appreciation of Throntveit’s emphasis on the

<sup>1</sup> Mark Throntveit, “The So-Called ‘Ten Commandments’ and the Relational, Vocational Decalogue,” *Word & World*, Supplement Series 5: “*And God Saw That It Was Good*”: *Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence E. Fretheim* (2006): 73–82.

*The meaning of the biblical texts is not only to be found in the words themselves, but often in the way the biblical authors and editors structure these words. This idea of structural meaning is explored by means of two case studies: Genesis 1 and 6, and Deuteronomy 7.*

relationship between structure and meaning, this essay will focus on the use of structure as a technique employed by ancient scribes to develop, enhance, and create meaning in the biblical texts.<sup>2</sup>

There can be little doubt that ancient Near Eastern scribes, including those in ancient Israel, were well trained in a wide range of technical devices associated with the composition, copying, transmission, editing, collation, revision, reworking, and interpretation of texts.<sup>3</sup> My focus in the present study will be on one of the most interesting of these devices, the literary chiasm, in which textual content is ordered in an ABC::C'B'A' chiastic, or “x-shaped,” pattern. For example, Psalm 19:1 (MT 19:2) praises God, saying:

*Exhibit 1: The Chiastic Structure of Psalm 19:1 (MT 19:2)*

הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֱלֹהִים  
וּמַעֲשֵׂהוּ יְדִיר מִגִּיד הַרְקִיעַ:

The heavens		A
declare		B
the glory of God;	C	
His handiwork	C'	
is proclaimed by		B'
the firmament.		A'

The second line of the verse in Hebrew precisely reverses the syntax of the first line. The sequence {speaker-action-divine attribute} in line 1 becomes {divine attribute-action-speaker} in line 2.<sup>4</sup> In my accompanying English translation in

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own in this essay. In the detailed analysis below, I have provided many of the original Hebrew words and phrases from the texts discussed as a way to acknowledge Mark Throntveit’s own love for Hebrew and his lifelong commitment to teaching Hebrew—to the extent of developing his own materials—to the generations of students who attended his classes, many of whom themselves became teachers, clergy, and professors.

<sup>3</sup> In my previous work, I have identified a range of devices, in addition to chiasm, that are prevalent in the literature of the ancient Near East. These include inverted citation, repetitive resumption (in which the composer brackets a digression or interpolation by framing it with a repetition, much as a flashback in a film is often correspondingly framed, introduced by a fade-out and concluded with a fade-in), selective quotation (for the purposes of transforming the meaning of a source text to suit the author’s purposes), and attribution of authorship of a text to an earlier, authoritative figure, such as Moses. For additional discussion of these literary techniques, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17–20, 34–38, 47–48, 97.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the Hebrew text of the second line of this verse uses an active verb. The word order in Hebrew, which reverses the word order in the first line, would therefore be more accurately rendered in English as “his handiwork, proclaims the firmament.” Unfortunately, reproducing the Hebrew syntax in the English translation might lead a reader to mistake “his handiwork” for the subject of the verb, rather than its object. To resolve this issue, I have converted the verb to the passive *is proclaimed by*. This approach allows me to

Exhibit 1 above, the chiasmic structure is shown graphically. While the simple example offered here employs chiasm within a single verse, chiasm in the Bible may also govern the structure of multiple verses in a passage. In many cases, once this pattern is recognized within a chapter or literary unit, an ostensibly haphazard or difficult-to-follow textual sequence gains a sense of order, as a logical structure emerges from the text. As such, recognition of the chiasm provides an intellectual and religious gain for the reader. Moreover, a study of chiasmus can provide a window into how scribes and editors worked with texts in antiquity.

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The ways in which some scholars have made use of chiasms raise two major concerns. First, the criteria for constructing the chiasm in a number of cases can often become, to use the technical term, “wobbly.” These criteria can shift between thematic correspondence and lexical coherence, and they sometimes work much better in English than in the original Hebrew. In some cases, they overlook repetitions of the same words in other structural components of the chiasm that could throw off the neat symmetry if they were taken into account.<sup>5</sup>

Second, too often there is a prevailing assumption that chiasm always points to the work of an original ancient author and therefore provides evidence for the antiquity and literary coherence of an ancient text. That approach is methodologically problematic, because it is too narrow and inconsistent with the historical evidence. Ancient scribes were much more gifted, both as composers and as editors, than we often give them credit for. They worked within a scribal curriculum, they were literate and well trained, and they could use the same tools for multiple functions. These functions included creating literary elegance, plot complication, bold rethinking of religious and cultural conventions, critical engagement with the past, and imagining new religious, legal, and ethical possibilities. The focus of this study will be on this more dynamic and complex role of the chiasm in the

demonstrate the chiasmic structure of the two lines by preserving the Hebrew syntax of the second line, while at the same time offering a translation that conveys the parallel meaning of the two lines.

<sup>5</sup> For an invaluable study of potential errors in the identification of chiasmic structures, see David P. Wright, “The Fallacies of Chiasmus: A Critique of Structures Proposed for the Covenant Collection (Exodus 20:23–23:19),” *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 10 (2004): 143–68. In a later reconsideration, Wright conceded the use of symmetrical structures as a compositional tool by ancient scribes in defined circumstances: David P. Wright, “Chiasmus in the Covenant Code Reconsidered: The Final Apodictic Laws,” in *“Gerechtigkeit und Recht zu üben” (Gen 18,19): Studien zur altorientalischen und biblischen Rechtsgeschichte, zur Religionsgeschichte Israels und zur Religionssoziologie. Festschrift für Eckart Otto zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Reinhard Achenbach and Martin Arneith, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 13 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), 171–81.

Hebrew Bible. The goal is to highlight the versatility of chiasm by presenting two case studies that demonstrate how chiasm points to the role of editors reworking traditions, responding to earlier texts, and transforming them.

### CASE STUDY 1: NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY (GENESIS 1 AND 6)

The first case study focuses on the role of chiasm in plot development and the creation of narrative complexity in the account of the Great Flood in Genesis 6–9. In the story, after God discovers, to great chagrin, that the humanity God has made devotes itself only to evil, God repents—this is one of the most extraordinary lines in the Bible—of having made humans (Gen 6:6) and sets out to destroy all life.<sup>6</sup> “Yahweh said, ‘I will blot out [אמחה] from the earth humankind whom I have created—from humans, to cattle, to creeping things, to birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them’” (Gen 6:7; cf. 7:23).<sup>7</sup> The divine intent signaled by the verb מחה is to transform the earth into a *tabula rasa*: to wipe the slate clean.<sup>8</sup> In order to emphasize this point, the divine announcement of doom repeats the account of God’s creation of life, as told in Genesis 1, in precisely reverse order:

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Sonnet examines this concept of God repenting in “God’s Repentance and ‘False Starts’ in Biblical History (Gen 6–9; Exod 32–34; 1 Sam 15 and 2 Sam 7),” in *Congress Volume: Ljubljana 2007*, ed. André Lemaire, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 133 (2010), 469–94. Sonnet’s future volume devotes a chapter to the narrative poetics of the changing of God’s mind in the flood story; see Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *Dramatis Persona: God as a Narrative Character in the Hebrew Bible* (in progress).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that published translations of these passages may make it difficult to identify similarities in their respective content. For example, the King James Version translation of בְּהֵמָה in Genesis 6:7 as “beasts” obscures the important allusion to the identical Hebrew word in Genesis 1:24, where KJV has translated it as “cattle.” In the narrative implementation of the divine announcement (Gen 6:7) that appears in 7:23, however, the word is correctly translated as “cattle.”

<sup>8</sup> The imagery inherent in the Hebrew verb is specifically that of erasure, in the first instance, textual (Num 5:23; Exod 32:32), but also more general wiping (2 Kgs 21:13). For further discussion of the verb, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2 vols., trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961–64), 1:304–5. This motif of God re-beginning from a *tabula rasa*, an enforced *ex nihilo* in response to human iniquity, is frequent in the Bible. It recurs in the debates between Moses and God following the episodes of the golden calf (Exod 32:10) and the spies (Num 14:11–12) and in the conception of the devastation of the autochthonous peoples of Canaan in order to create a new moral community bound by God’s law (Lev 18:24–30; 20:22–26).

Exhibit 2: The Chiastic Relationship between the Creation Account (Genesis 1) and the Flood Narrative (Genesis 6)

<u>Creation Story: Days 5 and 6</u>	
God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and <i>birds</i> [עֲרֵף] that fly above the earth . . ." (Gen 1:20).	A
God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: <i>cattle</i> [בְּהֵמָה], <i>creeping things</i> [רֶמֶשׂ], and wild beasts of every kind . . ." (Gen 1:24).	B
And God said, "Let us make <i>humans</i> [אָדָם] in our image . . ." (Gen 1:26).	C
<u>Flood Narrative</u>	
"Yahweh said, 'I will blot out [אֲמַחֶה] from the earth humankind whom I have created—from <i>humans</i> [אָדָם], to <i>cattle</i> [בְּהֵמָה], to <i>creeping things</i> [רֶמֶשׂ], to <i>birds</i> [עֲרֵף] of the sky; for I regret that I made them'" (Gen 6:7)	C' B' A'

The telling sequence of the life-forms listed in Genesis 6:7 thus ominously concretizes the verbal action of *מַחֶה* in that verse. As Exhibit 2 demonstrates, God cites in chiastic order (ABC::C'B'A') the series of creative acts God undertook on days five ("birds") and six ("cattle and creeping things" as a pair,<sup>9</sup> and "human-kind") of the creation of the world. The as yet unspecified form of destruction is thereby presented as a step-by-step reversal and undoing of the creation of life.

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The main point to stress about the chiasm in this text is that it is much more than just a formal marker of scribal activity. It also creates a major narrative pivot. In effect, within the world of the narrative, the chiasm acquires ontological status. It serves as the theological key of the plot at this point, presenting the flood as anti-creation, as an exact reversal of God's creative acts in Genesis 1. God announces

<sup>9</sup> The citation from Genesis 1:24 is, to be sure, not comprehensive but preserves in fixed order the only two substantives without the additional modifier, "of every kind."

the divine plan to pull the plug, both literally and metaphorically, on creation. There the story would abruptly end—not only leaving the scholar without a Bible to discuss but, more seriously, leaving the reader embarrassed by a Yahweh who, however omnipotent, patently lacks divine omniscience—if not for the omniscient narrator’s qualification, “But Noah found favor with Yahweh” (Gen 6:8). From this point onward in the story, Noah will become the basis for an experiment in divine eugenics: by means of Noah, Yahweh hopes to create a new human stock from a righteous root, after extirpating the wicked rest of humanity. Now with Noah God renews the covenant God had made with Adam.

### CASE STUDY 2: REIMAGINING THE NATURE OF DIVINE JUSTICE (DEUTERONOMY 7:9–10)

The second case study to be presented explores Deuteronomy 7:9–10, a text in which the chiasm points to the intentional literary and theological structure of the unit. Examination of this case equally points to textual coherence as a complex idea, since the text is the product of a skilled scribe commenting upon and reacting to an earlier layer of tradition. Deuteronomy 7:9–10 thus confirms the power of chiasm to allow us to recover the remarkable ability of ancient Israelite scribes and editors to overturn established notions of divine justice and to imagine new possibilities that focus on individual responsibility.

The Decalogue (or Ten Commandments) provides the point of departure for examining this passage. The second commandment prohibits the worship of deities other than God and offers the following rationale for the prohibition:

*Exhibit 3: Second Commandment of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:5b–6 = Deuteronomy 5:9b–10)*

לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֶקֶד עֵינָי אֲבֹת עַל־  
בָּנִים עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רַבְעִים לְשָׁנָא׃<sup>6</sup> וְעֵשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים לְאַהֲבֵי וְלִשְׂמָרֵי מִצְוֹתַי׃<sup>5</sup>

[For I, Yahweh, your God,<sup>10</sup> am an impassioned God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.]

The Hebrew participles translated “those who love” (לְאַהֲבֵי) and “those who reject” (לְשֹׂנְאֵי) are not simply emotional but legal terms. They reflect the terminology of ancient Near Eastern state treaties, in which “love” designates political loyalty to the suzerain while “reject” denotes acts of treason.<sup>11</sup> Israelite authors

<sup>10</sup> The Israelite god is referred to by two main names in the Bible: Yahweh and God.

<sup>11</sup> William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77–87; reprinted in William L. Moran, *The Most Magic Word: Essays on Babylonian and Biblical Literature*, ed. Ronald S. Hendel, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 35

took over this secular treaty terminology, together with the concept of a binding legal tie, in order to conceptualize the nation's relationship with its God as a covenant.<sup>12</sup> These ancient Near Eastern treaties were understood as being made in perpetuity. They were therefore binding not only upon those immediately signatory to them but also upon succeeding generations. The punishment for violating the treaty, then, applied not just to those who originally swore their agreement to it, but also to their progeny: that is, to their children and their grandchildren. That principle underlies God's threat in the Decalogue that God will visit rage upon the third and fourth generation of those guilty of breaking the covenant.

The Decalogue thus formulates a doctrine of the transgenerational consequences of sin. Although it is my parent who wrongs God, I and my children and my grandchildren are punished for the parent's wrongdoing, independent of any particular wrongdoing on our part. The text is remarkably silent about whether the actual sinner is punished for his or her own offense or whether the expected punishment might be completely displaced onto the progeny. Here there emerges a fundamental ethical and theological problem: Is it not *odious* for God to punish innocent persons, merely for being the progeny of sinners?

A remarkable transformation of this Decalogue doctrine can be found just two chapters later within the legal corpus of Deuteronomy, as shown in exhibit 4. The text presents itself as an address by Moses to the nation of Israel, given on the eve of the nation's entry into the promised land of Canaan, forty years after God originally delivered the law to the people at Mount Sinai (Deut 1:1–3). According to the editorial superscription in the biblical text, Moses here explicates the laws that God had earlier proclaimed (Deut 1:5) and exhorts the nation to obedience. In this new literary setting, Moses, while reviewing the past, ostensibly quotes the Decalogue (Deut 5:9–10 = Exod 20:5–6) and then preaches to the nation concerning it. Moses thus expounds upon divine justice.

*Exhibit 4: Mosaic Homily on Divine Justice (Deuteronomy 7:9–10)*

וַיִּדְעַתְּ כִּי־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים הָאֵל הַנִּצָּחַן שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּרִית וְנִחְסֵד לְאַהֲבָיו  
וְלִשְׁמֵרֵי מִצְוֹתָיו לְאַלְפֵי דוֹר: דֹּר: וּמִשְׁלָם לְשִׁנְאָיו אֶל־פָּנָיו לְהִאֲבִידוֹ לֹא יֵאָחֵז לְשִׁנְאָו  
אֶל־פָּנָיו יִשְׁלָם־לוֹ:

[Know, therefore, that only Yahweh your God is God, the steadfast God who keeps his gracious covenant to the thousandth generation of those who love him and keep his commandments, but who requites those

(Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 2002), 170–81. See also Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 81–91.

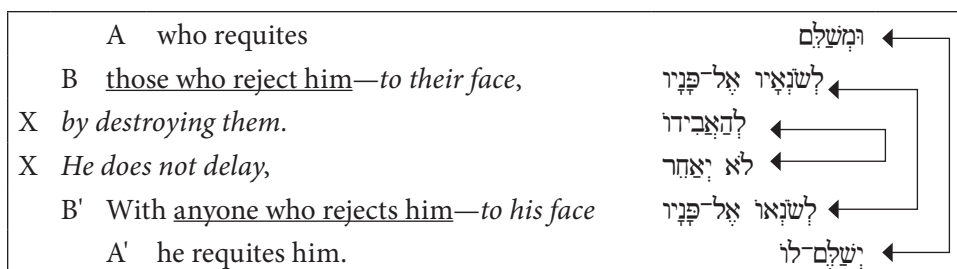
<sup>12</sup> The importance of the Near Eastern treaty model for covenantal theology has long been recognized. For a useful overview, see Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969). Despite the Exodus narrative's ancient setting at the beginning of the nation's history, the key theological idea of the covenant actually represents a late development, which was then read back into Israel's origins. For a recent overview of the issues, see A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters, eds., *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

who reject him—to their face, by destroying them. He does not delay with anyone who rejects him—to his face he requites him.].

The vocabulary of this passage makes it clear that the Mosaic speaker alludes specifically to the Decalogue, which he has previously quoted (Deut 5). This reuse of the Decalogue is marked by a chiasmic citation.<sup>13</sup> The first-person sequence of the Decalogue—(A) “those who reject me” (לְשׂוֹאֵי) and (B) “those who love me and keep my commandments” (לְאַהֲבָי וּלְשׂוֹמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי; Deut 5:9–10 [Qere]) is inverted. In the new context in Deuteronomy 7, it is recast as a third-person report and the order of the elements is reversed: (B’) “those who love him and keep his commandments” (לְאַהֲבָיו וּלְשׂוֹמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָיו) and (A’) “those who reject him” (לְשׂוֹאֵי [Qere]).

The Mosaic speaker purports to provide a homiletic paraphrase of the formula for divine justice in the Decalogue. But a closer look reveals that the homily so fundamentally transforms the original as to revoke it. The speaker has strategically deleted references to the transgenerational consequences of sin and instead asserts the *immediate* punishment of the sinner. By implication, divine punishment for sin is restricted to the sinner alone. In contrast to the Decalogue, the progeny, who are *here strikingly unmentioned*, are not explicitly visited with divine punishment.

*Exhibit 5: Legal Reworking in Support of Individual Responsibility (Deuteronomy 7:10)*



In form, this passage demonstrates two types of chiasm. In addition to the chiasmic citation of the Decalogue already noted, Deuteronomy 7:10 is structured as a chiasm. In the diagram of this verse in Exhibit 5, the underlining shows how a key term from the originally problematic text is cited: the retribution due “those who reject him,” which alludes to “those who reject me” in the Decalogue. Once cited, however, the same term receives a new continuation: the new teaching of

<sup>13</sup> The principle of inverted citation is named after its discoverer: Moshe Seidel, “Parallels between Isaiah and Psalms,” *Sinai* 38 (1955–56): 150; reprinted in Moshe Seidel, *Hiqrei Miqra* (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1978), 1–97 (Hebrew). Unfortunately, Seidel’s claims are often insufficiently controlled by criteria for establishing the direction of dependence. On this and related editorial markers, see Levinson, *Deuteronomy*, 17–20.



individual responsibility (as the *italicized* text shows). The double annotation stipulates that God requites the sinner, literally, “to his face” (אֶל-פְּנֵיָיו).<sup>14</sup> As the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi (1040–1105 CE) accurately saw, the phrase means “in his lifetime” (בְּחַיָּוֵינוּ).<sup>15</sup> The annotations redefine divine punishment and restrict it so that it no longer extends across generations. The paraphrase of the source thus abrogates the source, which now propounds the doctrine of individual responsibility. The chiasmic pattern of the textual reworking, as shown in the diagram (ABX::X'B'A'), frames and thus highlights Deuteronomy’s ethical innovation (marked by X): the introduction of the notion that God “does not delay” (לֹא יִאָּחַר) retributive justice—that is, punishment no longer occurs transgenerationally. The doctrinal innovation is accomplished by means of textual reformulation.

The doctrine of individual retribution is not presented in Deuteronomy 7 as a departure from the status quo. Instead, the new teaching is presented as consistent with the very doctrine that it rejects: as an authoritatively taught “re-citation” of the original *theologoumenon* or “divine proclamation.” The author of this text marshals the very words of the formula for transgenerational punishment against itself. Its key terms are redeployed so as to abrogate transgenerational punishment and mandate individual retribution instead. The evidence of Deuteronomy 7 thus requires a reassessment of the standard conception of the literary chiasm. The standard debate about whether it should be seen primarily in synchronic terms, as a compositional device, or rather in diachronic terms, as an editorial device, does not do justice to its use here. In this case, it subsumes characteristics associated with both editing and composition. Critical is the insight that the use of the device, while marking exegetical reinterpretation of a lemma, does not constitute a secondary redactional layer. The writer of this text reworks and reinterprets older law so as to make an original statement. In doing so, that writer emerges as both author and editor.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Contrary to several modern translations, the phrase cannot mean “immediately” or “instantly.” There is no evidence in the Bible for instantaneous divine retribution for wrongdoing.

<sup>15</sup> For the standard English translation of Rashi’s Commentary on the Pentateuch, see Morris Rosenbaum and Abraham Maurice Silberman, trans., *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth, and Rashi’s Commentary*, 5 vols. (London: Shapiro Valentine, 1929–34; reprint, Jerusalem: Silberman, 1973), 5:42.

<sup>16</sup> For an expanded study of the reworking and reinterpretation of the Decalogue’s doctrine of transgenerational punishment in a variety of texts, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

## CONCLUSIONS

Both the reversal of the creation account in the flood story and the reuse and teaching of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 7 provide examples of Throntveit's stress upon the significance of structure as indispensable to the exegesis of Scripture. The primary goal of this essay has been to demonstrate the richness and range of uses of one particular structural technique, the chiasm, as a scribal device in antiquity. As the case studies above show, among its many uses, chiasm could serve to provide narrative suspense and plot complexity, and as a way for editors to rework traditions and earlier texts to make powerful new theological statements about the nature of divine justice. It is thus too reductive to see the chiasm simply as a marker of compositional unity or of alleged antiquity. It could equally result from redactional layering or exegetical reworking. Nor should chiasm be regarded merely in aesthetic or formal terms as marking elegance. It can equally point to sites of profound religious creativity and mark the transformation of tradition with the infusion of new insight. In other words, the chiasm was more than simply a technical scribal device; in the skilled hands of the editors of ancient Israelite literature, the device was also an agent of the theological imagination, of literary and religious creativity, and of cultural change.

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