

Blasphemy, Talion, and Chiasmus: The Marriage of Form and Content in Lev 24,13-23

There is only one narrative in all of Lev 11–27. It is a brief narrative in Lev 24,10-12 that relates the story of a young man who “blasphemed the Name and cursed” during a fight. Moses and the people ask the Lord to advise them on how to deal with this offense, and the subsequent speech gives the divine response (24,13-23). The writer presents the report of the response as an extended chiasmus. “The inverted symmetry or reverse parallelism of this passage is engaging, impressive, extensive, and pleasing”⁽¹⁾. Jacob Milgrom remarks that while the chiasmic structure of this passage has long been recognized, the “ideological implications” of it have not been fully fathomed⁽²⁾. The present exposition intends to take us a little deeper than before, but does not pretend to fathom all the depths in this significant passage.

I will use Welch’s treatment of this passage as my starting-point, delineating the chiasmic structure and linking it to one or two other dominant stylistic features; and then I will similarly develop some thoughts regarding interpretation, noting those that Welch lays out and adding a couple more. My initial goal is to affirm his conclusion that the use of chiasmus contributes significantly to the ideological message of the passage. Not only does the chiasmic structure provide the literary means to develop and reinforce the legal principle of talion that lies at the heart of the divine decision, as Welch contends, but at the same time it illuminates the extreme gravity of the sin of blasphemy. The result is aesthetically pleasing at the literary level, but it also intends to facilitate the reader’s reception and implementation of the Lord’s verdict by reinforcing the talionic principle that the punishment fits the crime.

1. Chiasmic Presentation of Lev 24,13-23 (MT)

I have laid out the (unpointed) Masoretic text of Lev 24,13-23 in the adjoining chart, showing how I see the chiasmus in its various corresponding layers. The layer designated ‘I’ does not have a parallel because it constitutes the fulcrum of the chiasmus (24,20a). The translations in the discussion that follows are my own.

⁽¹⁾ J.W. WELCH, “Chiasmus in Biblical Law: An Approach to the Structure of Legal Texts in the Hebrew Bible”, *Jewish Law Association Studies IV: The Boston Conference Volume* (ed. B.S. JACKSON) (Atlanta, GA 1990) 8.

⁽²⁾ J. MILGROM, *Leviticus 23–27* (AB; New York 2000) 2130. For some recent acknowledgements of the chiasmic structure, see M. FISHBANE, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford 1985) 101; G.J. WENHAM, *Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI 1979) 312.

- A – וידבר יהוה אל־משה לאמר: (24,13)
 B – הוצא את־המקלל אל־מחויץ למחנה וסמכו כל־השמעים את־ידיהם
 על־ראשו ורגמו אתו כל־העדה: (24,14)
 C – ואל־בני ישראל תדבר לאמר (24,15a)
 D – איש איש כִּי־יקלל אלהיו ונשא הטאו: (24,15b)
 E – ונקב שם־יהוה מות יומת רגום ירגמו־בו כל־העדה כגד
 כאורח בנקבר־שם יומת: (24,16)
 F – ואיש כי יכה כל־נפש אדם מות יומת: (24,17)
 G – ומכה נפש־בהמה ישלמה נפש תחת נפש: (24,18)
 H – ואיש כִּי־יתן מום בעמיתו כאשר עשה כן ישעה לו: (24,19)
 I – שבר תחת שבר עין תחת עין שן תחת שן (24,20a)
 H' – כשאר יתן מום באדם כן יתן בו: (24,20b)
 G' – ומכה בהמה ישלמה (24,21a)
 F' – ומכה אדם יומת: (24,21b)
 E' – משפט אחד יהיה לכם כגד כאורח יהיה (24,22a)
 D' – כי אני יהוה אלהיכם: (24,22b)
 C' – וידבר משה אל־בני ישראל (24,23a)
 B' – ויוציאו את־המקלל אל־מחויץ למחנה ורגמו אתו אבן (24,23b)
 A' – ובני־ישראל עשו כאשר צוה יהוה את־משה: (24,23c)

Two clauses introduce two levels of direct address in the passage (vv. 13 and 15a). The first layer is the Lord's address to Moses alone, and the latter layer is what Moses is to pass on to the people. Some researchers restrict their analysis to the main speech in vv. 15-23a; but the mirroring of literary units actually entails the narrated introduction and conclusion (vv. 13-14 and 23bc; cf. Num 15,35-36). The triple iteration of the talion law in v. 20a is the fulcrum or hinge of the chiasmus, as eight juxtaposed pairs of statements surround the talionic law⁽³⁾. Each clause of the talion law proper constitutes the simplest chiastic form ("fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth"; v. 20a). The three syntactically identical clauses form a chiastic core of their own. The corresponding lines that make up each layer of the surrounding chiastic structure inherently reinforce the talion principle by echoing it stylistically. I will trace out these correspondences, moving outward from this inner crux, level by level. Then, I will comment on certain stylistic variations that expose aspects of the chiasmus that are significant for interpreting the message of the passage.

The chiastic layer lying closest to the triple iteration of the talion concerns injuries. It is balanced stylistically by a carefully coordinated use of the word "give" in vv. 19 and 20b (H + H'). The offense is described, most literally, in this way: "If a man gives an injury against his neighbor, just as he does thus it shall be done to him" (v. 19). The corresponding response in v. 20b collapses the two clauses of v. 19 with verbal and syntactical echoes, reading, "Just as he gives an injury to a human, thus it shall be given to him"⁽⁴⁾.

⁽³⁾ Welch isolates one less layer. What he identifies as a single pair of parallel lines (vv. 24,15b-16 + 22), I split into two pairs of parallel lines (D + D' – v. 24,15b/v. 22b, and E + E' – v. 16/v. 22a; see below). Otherwise our delineation of the chiasmus is the same.

⁽⁴⁾ Besides the use of *natan* in both lines, the writer repeats the alliterative sequence of particles (*ka'ašer* + *ken*) and the transition from active to passive verb forms.

The next two levels of the chiasmus (moving outward) concern the killing of an animal and the killing of a human, respectively (G + G' = vv. 18 + 21a, F + F' = vv. 17 + 21b). The corresponding statements regarding the killing of an animal (G + G') identify the killer with the same participle (*makkeh*), both identify the victim as *behemah*, and both instruct the offender to "make restitution" (*yešallemennah*; vv. 18 and 21a). The two statements concerning homicide (F and F') follow a similar pattern, employing the same verb to describe the killer, identifying the victim with the same word in each statement, and using the same verb to describe the fate of the victim and the fate of the perpetrator.

The next layer in the chiasmus is the most imbalanced (vv. 16 and 22a; E and E'). The only example of verbal correspondence comes in the phrase, "like alien, like native-born". The explanation for this imbalance derives from the context of the passage, which will be demonstrated below. The identification of vv. 15b and 22b as an isolated layer in this chiasmus (D + D') is debatable (again, Welch joins this layer with the one just mentioned). I separate these lines from the adjoining layers by virtue of the juxtaposed use of "his God" (v. 15b) and "your God" (v. 22b). Verses 15b and 22b taken together essentially represent a synonymous parallel with the instructions of Lev 22,2 and Lev 22,32, both of which link a prohibition against profaning the Lord's name (*hallel 'et šem*) with the common self-identification clause ("I am the Lord"; cp. 21,6. 8)⁽⁵⁾. Interpreters have debated the precise meaning of the instruction in 24,15b. Some take this as a statement of a general truth about any religion: "Anyone who curses his god [whether that god be the Lord or any other god] shall bear his sin". In such an understanding, v. 16 follows v. 15b to specify that "bearing his sin" will entail death in the case of a worshiper of the Lord who curses the Lord⁽⁶⁾. I agree with a second group of interpreters that understand v. 15 more narrowly, regarding the prohibition against someone cursing "his god" as a direct reference to cursing the Lord⁽⁷⁾. The charge mentioned in the preceding narrative is that the man "blasphemed the name and cursed" (24,11). The repetition of the latter verb in the prohibition lends some support to the second interpretation, which sees the prohibition in v. 15b dealing specifically with the offense. The present suggestion that the phrase "anyone who curses his God" (v. 15b = D) stands in chiasmic parallel to the phrase, "I am the Lord

⁽⁵⁾ The writer uses two phrases in 24,11 to denote the man's offense: he "blasphemes the Name (of the Lord)" and he "curses (his God)". Both expressions appear in the narrative (v. 11) and in the law (vv. 15-16). The first verb (*naqab*) normally carries a rather neutral connotation of "mention" or "utter" (see Num 1,17; 1 Chr 16,41). It only conveys a derogatory meaning here because of its close association with "curse" (*qallel*). In verse 11 the two verbs form a compound predicate ("he blasphemed... and he cursed"), which probably is to be read as a hendiadys — for example, "he blasphemed in a curse" (NRSV), or "he pronounced by cursing blasphemously" (B. LEVINE, *Leviticus* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA 1989] 166). In vv. 15-16 the same verbs are used in consecutive clauses, but their order has been reversed.

⁽⁶⁾ For example, FISHBANE, *Biblical Interpretation*, 101; J.E. HARTLEY, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas, TX 1992) 406; J. JOOSTEN, *People and Land in the Holiness Code* (Leiden 1996) 69.

⁽⁷⁾ For example, MILGROM, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2115; E.S. GERSTENBERGER, *Leviticus* (OTL; Louisville, KY 1996) 362.

your God” (v. 22b = D’), adds weight to the second interpretation (again, see 21,6-8; 22,2.32). It implies that when the man “curses” his God he is clearly rejecting the divine assertion, “I am the Lord your God”⁽⁸⁾.

The correspondence between 24,15a and 24,23a is undeniable (C + C’). The word order is different, but the same verb and object are used, and v. 23a names the assumed subject of v. 15a. There is similar certitude in the pairing of vv. 14 and 23b (B + B’). The verbs and objects of both clauses in v. 23b match those in the first and third clauses of v. 14, as v. 23 reports the fulfillment of the directive given in v. 14. The earlier partner is longer because of the additional clause in the middle of v. 14, about placing hands on the perpetrator. The omission of this clause from v. 23 is puzzling, but interpreters generally assume that the people performed this act, as v. 14 requires (see the fulfillment notice in v. 23c).

The final clause of v. 23 rounds off the chiasmus by mentioning “the Lord” and “Moses” again, corresponding to the narrated introduction of v. 13, which states simply “the Lord spoke to Moses”. The additional portion in v. 23 is the fulfillment notice (“the children of Israel did as the Lord had commanded Moses”). Similar fulfillment notices are prominent in the narrative sections interspersed in this central portion of the Torah, serving an important literary function in the final narrative block of Exodus (Exod 35,1.4.10.29; 36,1.5; 38,21-22; 39,1.5.7.21.26.29.31.32.42-43; 40,16.19.21.23.25.27.29.32), in the only other narrative section of Leviticus (Lev 8,5.9.13.17.21.29.31.34.36; 9,5.7.10.21; 10,15; cp. 10,1.5.7.18), and in the opening block of Numbers (Num 1,19.54; 2,33.34; 3,16.39.42.51; 4,37.41.45.49; 5,4; 8,3.20.22; 9,5.18.19.20.23). It is logical to conclude that a common author/redactor is responsible for all these narrative sections. The clause declares the obedience of the people, which is crucial to establishing and maintaining the sanctity of the cult. The act of cursing God threatens that sanctity, and this passage reports how the people successfully averted that threat.

In sum, all of Lev 24,13-23 forms a chiasmus, built around the *lex talionis*, which itself constitutes a simple syntactical chiasmus. The two outer layers of the chiasmus (A + A’, B + B’) constitute a legal decision and its execution in their own right, and the six inner layers illustrate in repetitive literary form the legal principle that lies at the core of that decision, the *lex talionis*.

⁽⁸⁾ Many interpreters assume that the blasphemer in this episode is considered an “alien”, and that one purpose of the law is to establish that aliens — like this man — are to be punished just like native-born Israelites in cases of blasphemy (e.g., WELCH, “Chiasmus in Biblical Law”, 11-12). However, the Israelite identification of the man’s mother might intend to identify him as Israelite as well. This was certainly the case in post-exilic Judea. It is not certain that the people consider this man an “alien”, much less a “foreigner”. More to the point, it is not certain that they already know how to respond if an Israelite curses God, and that now they are wondering how to respond when an alien commits such an offense. That could be the case, but we cannot be certain. In any case, the law is stated broadly enough to show that this individual is subject to it.

2. Other Stylistic Considerations

Despite the general symmetry provided by the chiasmic structure of the passage, there is a consistent imbalance to the speech, particularly in its four inner layers. The part just prior to the central fulcrum (v. 19 = H) consists of a main clause with “give” (*natan*) as the main verb, followed by a subordinate clause (“just as...”) that contains the active and passive forms of the same verb (“do”). The corresponding line in v. 20b (H’) is shorter. It collapses the two clauses of v. 19 and consists solely of a subordinate clause that contains the active and passive forms of “give”.

We find a different sort of imbalance in the next layer out (vv. 18 and 21a, lines G and G’). The object is identified as “the life of an animal” in the earlier line, but the latter line speaks more simply of one smiting “an animal”. Also, the earlier statement is supplemented with the talionic phrase, “life for life” (v. 18), but the phrase is absent from the corresponding line in v. 21a. The next layer (F + F’) is imbalanced in a slightly different way. The object is identified by the fuller expression, “the life of a human”, in the earlier line (v. 17), while the latter line speaks more simply of “a human”; this matches the style of the adjoining layer (just mentioned). Similarly, the verbs provide a shift that is parallel to the adjoining layer, as the writer expresses the verb of judgment with an intensive infinitive in v. 17 (“he shall surely be put to death”), but there is only a simple verb in the corresponding line (v. 21b — “he shall be put to death”).

This brings us to the greatest imbalance of the entire chiasmus, the imbalance between v. 16 and v. 22a (E and E’). The only direct correspondence between the two pieces involves the brief comparison clause (“like alien, like citizen”). This means that the clause, “You shall have one judgment”, in v. 22a is structurally equivalent to everything but the comparison clause in v. 16. Verse 16 contains two intensive infinitive constructions (“[he] shall surely die” and “[they] shall surely stone him”), followed by a comparison clause and then a simple reiteration of the initial verb clause (“[he] shall die”). The chiasmic structure of the whole speech shows that the brief statement about “one judgment” in v. 22a serves as a structural parallel and summation of the much longer dual judgment prescriptions and the abbreviated reiteration in v. 16 (E + E’).

The literary features of the expanded statement in v. 16 are significant, because they actually push the reader forward, toward the center of the chiasmus. The expansion in v. 16 consists of an intensive infinitive construction (“he shall surely be put to death”), supplemented by a second intensive infinitive (“they shall surely stone him”), and then recapitulated by the simple form of the first verb (“he shall be put to death”). These features point the reader toward the next two layers of the chiasmus because the pattern of movement from intensive verb to regular verb — “he shall surely be put to death” // “he shall be put to death” — constitutes a primary component of the chiasmic structuring of those layers (vv. 17 and 21b; F and F’). Just as the E + E’ layer points toward the inner layers of the chiasmus, so the statement in the F + F’ layer points the reader inward, toward the chiasmic core of the pericope. The literary style is significant secondly because v. 16 uses two intensive infinitives in addressing most directly the reason for this

speech. The simple phrase, “You will have one judgment”, in v. 21 reminds the reader that the purpose of this chiasmic speech is to provide a judgment for an offense, and it points back to v. 16 as that judgment. The double use of the intensive reflects the seriousness of the offense and the certitude of the judgment. Meanwhile, the direct repetition of the comparison clause recalls an immediate issue in this particular case. That issue is the matter of application: whether the law applies to non-Israelites living among them. The text answers with a resounding affirmative, but by directing the reader toward the inner core of the pericope, it bases that judgment on the core principle of talion, not on a pre-existing judgment used by the Israelites.

The overall structure of the chiasmus places the talionic principle at the center, but it then proceeds from the principle outward in steps of ever-increasing import. One can recognize the logic of the arrangement by viewing (again) the chiasmus from the center and moving out. The layers ripple out from the talionic core, moving from permanent injury (“blemish”) to death of an animal to death of a human. The progression is from less serious offense (at the center) to more serious offense. The placement of “life for life” (v. 18) away from the central three examples of talion (v. 20a) supports this understanding of the pericope’s progression, and the triple iteration of the talion principle at the middle of the chiasmus affirms it. The core principle is equitable reciprocity.

It is helpful to recognize how the presentation of talion in this passage is different from the presentation in the two other passages that delineate the talion principle (Exod 21,23-25; Deut 19,21). Those passages begin with “life for life” and proceed to “eye for eye” and “tooth for tooth”, and then they continue in a descending order on the body, and from body parts that are lost to those that are only scarred. The sequence of three clauses at the fulcrum of the present passage (Lev 24,20a) breaks from this sequence and mentions only bodily injuries. The core principle is “injury for injury”, repeated three times. This allows the three clauses to function together as the fulcrum of the chiasmus and the starting-point for applying the talion principle. One moves from the basic principle to its application in more serious offenses, first with matters of life, and then on to the matter of blasphemy of the Divine Name.

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Welch identifies six ways in which the chiasmic form of this passage enhances the deeper message it intends to convey: (1) it gives a sense of completion to the story, (2) it emphasizes the importance of obedience to a divine command, (3) it promotes the internalization of the command by placing it within a real-life event, (4) it provides a helpful mnemonic device, (5) it “enhance[s] the moral imperative” of the judgment, and (6) it reinforces the impression that God’s decision here is fair and just. The recognition that the organizing principle of the chiasmus is from the center outward reinforces this last observation, because it reveals that the ideational progression of the pericope is from lesser offense (at the center) to greater offense. The chiasmic center of the divine directive is the triple talion statement concerning injury. The seriousness of the offenses increases as one moves out from that center, from injury to the killing of an animal to the killing of a human. Cursing God

is regarded as a more serious offense than murder (see Matt 12,31). This progression exposes the ultimate magnitude of blasphemy, because it is the outermost offense presented in the chiasmus. It seems, then, that the primary goal of the passage is to clarify the gravity of the sin of blasphemy and/or cursing.

There is hardly any mention of blasphemy in ancient Near Eastern texts, and I am aware of only one that refers in an indirect way to the sort of punishment one might expect for such an offense⁽⁹⁾. The present text strongly implies that “cursing Yahweh” is to be regarded as a graver offense than murder. Murder is an affront against a life, but it is likely that, in the writer’s mind, cursing the Lord is an affront against life itself. The Lord is the creator and sustainer of life. To mention his “name” is to recall all that he is and all that he has done. It is to recall his life-giving essence (implied in Gen 1–2, especially 2,7; cf. 9,4-6; Job 12,10; 27,3; 33,4), and it is to recall his mighty acts that provide and sustain life (again, for example, note the oft-repeated clause, “I am the Lord...” in Lev 18–22). To curse the Lord is to reject who he is and what he does. It is to deny his essence and his power, and it is to refute the reality of his life-giving and holy acts⁽¹⁰⁾.

At the same time, the use of chiasmus to verbalize the judgment and its underlying principle suggests to the reader that the prescribed response to the offense is balanced and therefore reasonable. The structural balance in the corresponding phrases throughout the literary unit mirrors the moral balance of the legal response to the offense. Thus, the writer has chosen a literary style for this unit that reinforces the legal principle that lies at the heart of the unit and the sense of inherent justice that intends to permeate the divine judgment in this case.

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SUMMARY

The verbal divine response to a case of blasphemy/cursing of God is presented as a lengthy chiasmus in Lev 24,13-23. One aspect of this that has gone unnoticed is how the structure suggests that blasphemy is a more serious offense than murder. This observation shows how the pericope fits well thematically in Lev 18-26, where there are repeated examples of the divine self-declaration formulas (“I am the Lord...”) and references to holiness.

⁽⁹⁾ MILGROM, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2120.

⁽¹⁰⁾ For some similar conclusions, see S.E. BALENTINE, *Leviticus* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY 2002) 188-190.