

Chiasmus in the Ignatian Inscription to the Romans

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THIS ARTICLE offers a detailed analysis of the structural markers in the salutation of Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Romans. I make a new proposal, not yet observed in scholarship on Ignatius, that the inscription has been carefully crafted as a chiasmus. In the first part I seek to illustrate the chiasmic structure by means of discourse analysis, and in the second I offer some brief reflections on the immediate and broader implications of my findings.¹ Although the vexing question of the authenticity of the middle recension remains an open one, the results of this study apply regardless of whether our author was the Antiochian bishop he claims to be or a later second-century forger.² But while we remain neutral with regard

¹ For the use of chiasmus in ancient literature generally consult John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Ancient Greek and Latin Literatures," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim 1981) 250–268; for NT examples, 211–249.

² For a helpful review of recent research see Jonathon Lookodoo, "The Date and Authenticity of the Ignatian Letters: An Outline of Recent Discussions," *Currents in Biblical Research* 19 (2020) 88–114. Some who favor an authentic collection: Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (New Haven 1960) 8; William R. Schoedel, "Are the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch Authentic?" *Religious Studies Review* 6 (1980) 196–201; Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*³ (Grand Rapids 2007) 171–173; Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy* (London 2009) 95–143. Others who hold that the letters are later forgeries: Robert Joly, *Le dossier d'Ignace d'Antioche* (Brussels 1979); Reinhard Hübner, "Thesen zur Echtheit und Datierung der sieben Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochien," *ζAC* 1 (1997) 48–50; Thomas Lechner, *Ignatius*

to the authorship of the Ignatian epistles, for convenience, the writer will be referred to as 'Ignatius'.

Scholarly comment on Ignatius' literary style generally does not speak well of his ability to form cohesive, well-structured prose. In his landmark study of ancient epistolography, Eduard Norden takes Ignatius' literary form to be "of the highest passion and formlessness. There is indeed no piece of literature of the time that violates the language in such a sovereign way."³ Virginia Corwin also recognizes a certain "lack of coherence and form. The writing is broken ... and above all lacking in connected argument."⁴ Harald Riesenfeld similarly states that, in the Ignatian epistles "[t]here is nothing of the well-balanced sentences which are characteristic of the main current of Greek prose from the classical period far down into the age of the Hellenistic *koïnē*."⁵ While recognizing certain moments of brilliance and his important contribution to early Christian literature, these reflections are representative of scholarly views on Ignatius' lack of literary form, balance, and cohesion in the seven letters (and this much can be expected, assuming that the author was writing *en route* to his own martyrdom).⁶ This article seeks to nuance this scholarly sentiment toward an appreciation of Ignatius' ability (though not tendency) to write in good form, using the salutation to the Romans as an example.⁷ My discourse

adversus Valentinianos? *Chronologische und theologieggeschichtliche Studien zu den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochien* (Leiden 1999) 6–117.

³ *Die antike Kunstprosa*² (Leipzig 1909) II 511; transl. W. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia 1985) 7.

⁴ *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* 19.

⁵ "Reflections on the Style and the Theology of St. Ignatius of Antioch," *StudPat* 4 (1961) 315.

⁶ See also Johannes Quasten's comments, *Patrology: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* I (Utrecht 1950) 64: "His language, spirited and intensely original, scorns the tricks and niceties of style. His soul in its inimitable zeal and ardor soars above and beyond the ordinary modes of expression."

⁷ My reflections here run alongside a movement in recent work which takes

analysis uses the Greek text of Michael Holmes,⁸ and the chiasmus in its essential form is presented at 226 below.

TABLE 1: Chiasmus in the Inscription to the Romans

CHIASM	PRAGMATIC LABELS	DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
A Signature Participle I Refrain ΥΙΟΣ Participle II Participle III Refrain ΘΕΟΣ	 <i>Address</i> <i>Means</i> <i>Appositional Gen.</i> <i>Address</i> <i>Address</i> <i>Means/Material</i> <i>Subjective Gen.</i> <i>Antithetical Prep. Phrase</i> <i>Subjective Gen.</i>	Ἰγνάτιος, ὁ καὶ Θεοφόρος, τῇ ἡλεημένη ἐν μεγαλειότητι πατρὸς ὑψίστου <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ μόνου υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ</div> ἐκκλησίᾳ ἡγαπημένη καὶ πεφωτισμένη ἐν θελήματι τοῦ θελήσαντος τὰ πάντα ἃ ἔστιν, κατὰ πίστιν καὶ ἀγάπην <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν,</div>
B Presiding Centerpiece	 <i>Relative Clause</i> <i>Gen. Subordination</i> <i>Predicate Nominatives</i>	ἥτις καὶ προκάθηται ἐν τόπῳ χωρίου Ῥωμαίων, ἀξιοθεός, ἀξιοπρεπής, ἀξιωμακάριστος, ἀξιέπαινος, ἀξιοεπίτευκτος, ἀξιοαγνος

note of Ignatius' structural composition. On a chiasmus in Eph 7:2 see Gregory Vall, *Learning Christ: Ignatius of Antioch and the Mystery of Redemption* (Washington 2013) 99–100, 103; Jonathon Lookodoo, *The Christology of Ignatius of Antioch* (Eugene 2023) 37, 48, 54–55; on the rhetorical structure of Ignatius' letter to the Romans, P. A. Cavallero, "La retórica en la *Epístola a los romanos* de san Ignacio de Antioquía," *Helmantica* 48 (1997) 269–322; on the structure of Eph 5 and Rom 7, Devon M. Throness, "The Eucharistic Theology of Ignatius of Antioch: Sacramental Realism Reconsidered" (M.A. thesis, Regent College, 2024) 51–52, 59, and 66–70 respectively. Also see Schoedel's note on a chiasm in Eph 19:3, *Ignatius of Antioch* 88.

⁸ Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* 224.

Presiding	<i>Relative Clause Cont'd</i> <i>Gen. Subordination</i> <i>Predicate Nominatives</i> <i>Relative Clause Cont'd</i>	καὶ προκαθήμενη τῆς ἀγάπης, χριστόνομος, πατρώνυμος, ἦν καὶ ἀσπάζομαι ἐν ὀνόματι
Refrain YIOΣ	<i>Appositional Gen.</i>	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, υἱοῦ πατρὸς
A'		
Participle IV	<i>Address</i> <i>Antithetical Prep. Phrase</i>	ἠνωμένοι ⁹ κατὰ σάρκα καὶ πνεῦμα πάσῃ ἐντολῇ αὐτοῦ,
Participle V	<i>Address</i> <i>Gen. of Content</i>	πεπληρωμένοις χαρίτος θεοῦ ἀδιακρίτως καὶ
Participle VI	<i>Address</i> <i>Gen. of Separation</i>	ἀποδιυλισμένοις ἀπὸ παντὸς ἄλλοτρίου χρώματος
Conclusion		πλεῖστα
Refrain ΘΕΟΣ		ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ, τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν, ἀμόμως χαίρειν.

The left column in Table 1 presents the key elements of the chiasmus that structure Ignatius' introduction. Robert Grant and P. A. Cavallero have already observed that this salutation progresses in three general movements, with a typical signature, address of the church (beginning ἥτις), and the greeting itself (beginning ἀσπάζομαι);¹⁰ my proposal differs slightly on the boundaries to reflect an inherent A B A' pattern. On this reading, the salutation opens first with a greeting, second with a description of Rome's preeminence, and third with a mirror image of the initial greeting. The center column assigns prag-

⁹ Word order modified in order to clarify the grammatical relationship. Original: κατὰ σάρκα καὶ πνεῦμα ἠνωμένοις.

¹⁰ Grant labels these sections generally as: 1) a "conventional introduction," 2) "a rhetorical but explicit description of the Roman church," and 3) "the greeting itself": Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers IV Ignatius of Antioch* (Camden 1966) 85. Cavallero, *Helmantica* 48 (1997) 277–281, also breaks the salutation into three parts and comments on the rhetoric employed therein.

matic labels to the Greek as they are relevant to the chiasm, and the right column offers a discourse analysis of the passage.

In both of the A sections, Ignatius addresses the Romans with an impressive string of substantival, divine passive participles: they are those who have received mercy, are beloved, enlightened, united, filled, and purified (by God) (ἠλεημένη, ἠγαπημένη, πεφωτισμένη, ἠνωμένοις, πεπληρωμένοις, ἀποδιῦλισμένοις). The A and A' sections mirror each other by featuring three of these participles respectively, each decorated with its own prepositional phrases that comprehensively draw out the extent of the Romans' favor before God: they are unified by every one (πάσῃ) of his commands and purified from every (παντός) foreign color by the one who willed everything that exists (τὰ πάντα ᾗ ἔστιν). Two of these prepositional phrases form an *inclusio* around the B section, the one contrasting faith and love, the other flesh and spirit—two common Ignatian antithetical terms.¹¹ It may well be the case that, because the first prepositional phrase follows the participle (πεφωτισμένη ... κατὰ πίστιν καὶ ἀγάπην), the second is intentionally placed behind its related participle in order to preserve the *inclusio* (κατὰ σάρκα καὶ πνεῦμα ἠνωμένοις, see below). All the participles in A are feminine singular, while those in A' are all masculine plural. Finally, the concluding two participles in both sections are coupled together with the adjunctive καὶ:

TABLE 2: Participial Mirror

A	B	A'
ἠλεημένη ἠγαπημένη καὶ πεφωτισμένη κατὰ πίστιν καὶ ἀγάπην ...	ᾗ ἔστιν- × 6	... κατὰ σάρκα καὶ πνεῦμα ἠνωμένοις πεπληρωμένοις καὶ ἀποδιῦλισμένοις

¹¹ For more on the theological significance of these terms see Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* 23–26.

In addition to the use of participles, what creates cohesion through all three sections of this inscription are variations on a ‘Jesus Christ’ motif. Part A contains both variations: the first identifies Jesus as Son of the Father (πατρός ὑψίστου καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ μόνου υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ) and the second identifies Jesus with God himself (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν). Ignatius consistently works in dualisms, and Cavallero has noted that these two titles function in apposition, with Jesus’ sonship on the one hand and his fully divine status on the other.¹² But I wish to argue that this apposition extends beyond the A section: section B actually adopts and condenses the first of these iterations (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ πατρός) while A’ adopts the second exactly (save for case: Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν). Ignatius thus introduces the material in A, and then reuses it in B – A’ using an oscillating pattern: (A) Jesus as Son, Jesus as God, (B) Jesus as Son, (A’) Jesus as God. Note also that their placement comes at the conclusion of each section, and thus further confirms and marks out our proposed A – B – A’ chiasm:

TABLE 3: Divine Names

A	
Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ μόνου υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν
B – A’	
Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ πατρός	Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν

Moving now to the features of the B section, we find at the center of the chiasm another series of six flattering attributes listed in sequence: ἀξιόθεος, ἀξιοπρεπής, ἀξιομακάριστος, ἀξιέπαινος, ἀξιοεπίτευκτος, and ἀξιάγνος. Adolf von Harnack observes that these predicates are not arbitrary tokens of praise but specifically tailored to the Roman church herself,¹³ and Lightfoot briefly takes note of their symmetrical composition,¹⁴ but neither

¹² Cavallero, *Helmantica* 48 (1997) 277.

¹³ “Das Zeugnis des Ignatius über das Ansehen der römischen Gemeinde,” *SBBerl* (1896) 113.

¹⁴ *The Apostolic Fathers* II.2 (London 1885) 191–192.

notes their place within a much larger chiasm. The use of asyndeton and homoeoteleuton here, along with the general heightened sense of the prose, is of course emphatic;¹⁵ the level of commendation here surpasses anything found in the other Ignatian inscriptions.¹⁶ Bookending these adjectives is yet another *inclusio*, this time describing the “presiding” or “preeminence”¹⁷ (προκάθεται, προκαθήμενη) of the Romans. Both occurrences take a genitive of subordination (χωρίου Ῥωμαίων / τῆς ἀγάπης):

Προκάθεται ... χωρίου Ῥωμαίων
 ἀξιόθεος
 ἀξιοπρεπής
 ἀξιομακάριστος
 ἀξίεπαινος
 ἀξιοεπίτευκτος
 ἀξιάαγνος
 προκαθήμενη τῆς ἀγάπης

Instead of bookends, one could take both uses of προκαθίμαι as initiating their own list of adjectives:

Προκάθεται ... χωρίου Ῥωμαίων ἀξιόθεος ἀξιοπρεπής ἀξιομακάριστος ἀξίεπαινος ἀξιοεπίτευκτος ἀξιάαγνος	προκαθήμενη τῆς ἀγάπης χριστόνομος πατρώνυμος
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There are still other minor structural features one could point to here, like the relative clauses begun with ἥτις and ἣν bookending the B section, each with its own prepositional phrase using ἐν with a genitive modifier. As well, one might consider χριστόνομος and πατρώνυμος as being the centerpiece of the divine names mentioned in Table 3:

¹⁵ On this list see further Cavallero, *Helmantica* 48 (1997) 280.

¹⁶ With Ephesians coming as a close second.

¹⁷ The latter translation according to Allen Brent, “Ignatius of Antioch and the Imperial Cult,” *VigChr* 52 (1998) 30–58, at 45–46.

Christonomos and Patronumos

Jesus as God	Jesus as Son
Jesus as Son	Jesus as God

These features and others, though, may not be strong enough to be considered as essential to the chiasm. Adopting this paradigm for reading Ignatius' salutation, we might isolate and simplify the distinct structural features of the chiasm here for clarity:

TABLE 4

A		
	ἡλεημένη	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ μόνου υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ
	ἡγαπημένη	
	πεφωτισμένη	
	κατὰ πίστιν καὶ ἀγάπην	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν
B		
	Προκάθεται ... χωρίου Ῥωμαίων	
	ἀξιοθέος	
	ἀξιοπρεπῆς	
	ἀξιωμακάριστος	
	ἀξίεπαινος	
	ἀξιοεπίτευκτος	
	ἀξιοάγονος	
	προκαθιμένη τῆς ἀγάπης	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ πατρὸς
A'		
	κατὰ σάρκα καὶ πνεῦμα	
	ἠνωμένοις	
	πεπληρωμένοις	
	ἀποδιῦλισμένοις	Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν ¹⁸

¹⁸ In addition to these findings, it has been brought to my attention by an anonymous reviewer for *GRBS* that this smaller chiasm which opens the letter is nested within what is possibly a larger chiasmic structure featured across the entire letter (provided below). Jonathon Lookadoo, "Christocentric Letters: Christology in the Greetings of Ignatius's Romans," *JBTS* 3 (2018) 249–259, has already explored the ways in which the inscription's theology anticipates the theology of the letter body, and so this additional contribution would show that this same kind of foreshadowing may also be at work at the letter's structural level of composition. This proposal assumes, however, that the

Concluding remarks

The standard view of Ignatius' epistolography, I am suggesting, is in need of some nuance. The inscription to the Romans reveals careful and meticulous attention to literary form. "Formlessness" and a lack of cohesion certainly do not characterize this passage, nor does Adolf von Harnack's evaluation of this inscription: "Auf Jeden, der die classische Sprache der Griechen kennt, muss dieses Convolut von Sätzen, von unklar gedachten und ungrüchisch stilisirten Gedanken, von formelhaften Ausdrücken und wechselnden, einander störenden Bildern zunächst abschreckend wirken."¹⁹ Ignatius here uses a range of grammatical tools (carefully placed participles, prepositional phrases, adjectives, and names) to form an elaborate chiasmus. On the view that the Ignatian letters are late-second-century forgeries, these findings may be thought to fall neatly into the hands of a capable writer with ample leisure to carefully construct an impressive introduction. On the view that the collection is authentic, my findings would suggest either that Ignatius had more time to write from Smyrna and deployed greater attention to detail in his composition than is typically imagined, or that

chapter divisions faithfully present and track with the progression of Ignatius' thought, a point which I largely grant, but have disputed with respect to Rom 7–8 (Throness, "The Eucharistic Theology of Ignatius" 67–69). The most compelling parallels are found between chapters 2 + 8 and 4 + 6, where the sections begin with near-identical motifs. Still others can be found between 1 and 9 (prayer opens the sections, but cf. 3.2, 4.2, 8.3) and 3 and 7 (see the use of "envy" in 3.1 and 7.2), but given the narrow focus of the letter, it remains difficult to discern whether these features are intentionally chiasmic or merely coincidental:

2 I don't want you to please people (οὐ γὰρ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἀνθρωπαρρασκεῖσαι)

4 By my own choice I die for God (ἐγὼ ἐκὼν ὑπὲρ θεοῦ ἀποθνήσκω)

5 Fighting wild beasts from Syria to Rome

6 It is good for me to die for Christ (καλὸν μοι ἀποθανεῖν διὰ Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν)

8 I no longer want (οὐκέτι θέλω) to live according to human standards (ἀνθρώπου)

¹⁹ Harnack, *SBBerl* (1896) 112.

the revisions of a redactor are to be held responsible.²⁰ But while the question of *to whom* the credit is due will continue to remain open, the results of this study show that, nevertheless, *the credit is due*. Thus, while the author's writing style is often characterized by broken and unbalanced prose, our reading of this passage demonstrates that our writer was capable of exercising a high level of command over the structural elements of his composition.

If we assume for the moment an authentic collection, this inscription to the Romans would have provided the perfect occasion for Ignatius to display his literary skills. The Christians based in Rome were the only church that held in their hands the fate of this martyr-to-be. The difference between 'obtaining God' and becoming a failure hinged on the success of this letter, and so Ignatius produced the finest inscription found in the Ignatian collection.²¹ We can say that the motive for this kind of epideictic, flattering rhetoric would have been, on the one hand, to acclaim the preeminent place of the Romans as a kind of bastion of orthodoxy (cf. Rom 3:1), but on the other hand, also to obtain their goodwill and their receptivity to his request to die. As far as we know, his request was granted.²²

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²⁰ Thomas Johann Bauer, "Ignatios – alter Paulus?" in *Die Briefe des Ignatios von Antiochia: Motive, Strategien, Kontexte* (Berlin 2018) 93–129.

²¹ Henning Paulsen echoes the sentiment, though not with regard to the literary structure of the inscription: "Die Einleitung des Rm übertrifft die der anderen Briefe des Ign an Umfang, Fülle und sprachlicher Gestaltung": *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia und der Brief des Polykarp von Smyrna*² (Tübingen 1985) 68.

²² I would like to extend my thanks to the anonymous referees at *GRBS* for their helpful comments on this manuscript. I am also grateful to Dr. George Guthrie of Regent College for being the first to direct my attention to the importance of discourse markers and structural features in ancient literature.