

## A REBIRTH-WASHING AND A RENEWAL-HOLY SPIRIT

Elsewhere in this issue (p 150) there is a review of a book by Nils Lund which asserts the importance of recognizing the literary device of chiasm when reading and interpreting the New Testament. There is no doubt that chiasm (the reversal of the order of words in two otherwise parallel phrases) is very common in the Scriptures. Chiastically-structured verses are especially common in psalms. An interestingly intertwined double chiasm is found in [Psalm 18:5, 6](#) (Heb), which literally reads: “Entangled me *cords of death, rivers of destruction* overwhelmed me; *cords of the grave* surrounded me, confronted me *snare of death*.” Sections of books ([Psalms 120–133](#), [Daniel 2–7](#)) and even whole books (Song of Songs) are arranged chiastically.

An interesting example of a chiastic phrase occurs in [Titus 3:5](#): κατὰ τὸ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος ἔσωσεν ἡμᾶς διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας καὶ ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου. Traditionally this verse has been translated by retaining the Greek word order: “According to his mercy [God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.” This rendering can be understood correctly, but it fails to do justice to the literary parallelism and the chiastic arrangement of the text.

The key words are διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας καὶ ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου. Following the preposition διὰ, there are four genitives, arranged as two pairs. Two of the genitives, one from each pair, seem to be objects of the preposition διὰ. The other two, therefore, must modify the two objects of διὰ. Since λουτροῦ immediately follows διὰ, it seems likely that λουτροῦ, rather than παλιγγενεσίας is the object of διὰ. παλιγγενεσίας, therefore, modifies λουτροῦ. Since παλιγγενεσίας and ἀνακαινώσεως are obviously parallel in meaning, it is likely that ἀνακαινώσεως is also a modifying genitive. This leaves πνεύματος ἁγίου as the second object of διὰ.

The sentence including the preposition and its two objects therefore reads: “God saved us through *washing* and *the Holy Spirit*.” This phrase thus forms an exact parallel to [John 3:5](#), “born of *water* and *the Spirit*.” In both passages baptism and the Holy Spirit are placed side by side as agents by which God works saving faith in us.

The two remaining genitives, παλιγγενεσίας and ἀνακαινώσεως, which are parallel in meaning, modify “washing” and “Holy Spirit.” In Greek the genitive case often makes one noun function as an adjective which modifies another noun. In English we achieve this same effect by placing the noun which is to serve as an adjective in front of the noun which it is modifying, as in phrases like “a garage sale,” “a fire sale,” or “a one-cent sale.” Neither the Greek nor the English constructions tell us what the relationship is between the main noun and its modifier. However, our experience with English tells us that in the phrase “a garage sale” a garage is very likely the place in which the sale is taking place. It is grammatically possible that a garage is the object which is being sold, but we would not come to this conclusion unless there was compelling evidence in the context to force us in this direction. In the same way our experience would suggest to us that in the second phrase a fire was the cause which made the sale necessary. In the third case, we would expect that if we bought one item for the regular price, we would be able to buy another of the same item for one cent. In all these cases our interpretation depends on our knowledge of the context of the sentence

and our fluency in the idioms of American English. There is nothing in the grammatical construction itself to guide us to the proper interpretation of a noun used as an adjective. (For a further illustration analyze the phrases “alligator shoes,” “baby shoes,” “tennis shoes,” and “horse shoes.”)

The same situation exists whenever a reader of the Bible is interpreting a Greek genitive which is causing a noun to function as an adjective. All that the grammatical construction tells the interpreter is that in this passage he is dealing with a “rebirth washing” and a “renewal Holy Spirit.” He must use his knowledge of the immediate and wider context to deduce that this passage is about a washing which produces rebirth and a Holy Spirit who works renewal. This interpretation creates a second parallel between [Titus 3:5](#) and [John 3:5](#), which says we are “*born* of water and the Spirit.”

It is grammatically possible to [translate](#): “God saved us through a washing of regeneration and a renewal of the Holy Spirit,” but this [translation](#) eliminates the literary parallelism created by the word meanings. It is obvious that “regeneration” and “renewal” are parallel in meaning. This suggests that the remaining word pair, “washing” and “Spirit,” are also parallel, although this parallelism is not inherent in the word meanings. The [translation](#), “a washing of regeneration and a renewal of the Holy Spirit,” also destroys the parallelism of function between the modifying genitives. A “washing of regeneration” could be a washing which works regeneration, but a “renewal of the Holy Spirit” could not be a renewal which works the Holy Spirit.

The intention of the NIV [translation](#) is unclear. I have always understood it to mean: “God saved us through the washing of rebirth and [through] renewal *by* the Holy Spirit.” Although this [translation](#) can be understood correctly, it fails to make it clear that the washing of baptism is a means of rebirth, as the analogy of Scripture teaches. Because it eliminates the parallelism between the two phrases, the NIV [translation](#) is more susceptible to the interpretation that, although the Spirit is an agent who works renewal in us, washing is not a means of working rebirth. “Washing” may then be understood not as a means of grace, but simply as a figurative term for rebirth: “God saved us by the washing, that is, by rebirth, and by renewal which is worked by the Holy Spirit.”

The NIV [translation](#) could also be understood as a three-link genitive chain: “God saved us by the <sup>1</sup>washing <sup>2</sup>of rebirth and of renewal <sup>3</sup>which is by the Holy Spirit.” This rendering is grammatically possible, but it has the same weakness of undermining the parallel between “washing” and “Spirit” as the [translation](#) discussed in the preceding paragraph.

Only an interpretation which recognizes the chiasmic arrangement of the four genitives preserves the literary device of parallelism: “God saved us through the washing which works rebirth and through the Holy Spirit who works renewal.” Greek grammar allows this [translation](#). The frequency of the literary device of chiasmic parallelism suggests that this [translation](#) is preferable to others which are grammatically possible. This [translation](#) also stresses the scriptural truth that both baptism and the Holy Spirit are agents or means through which God works faith in us.

In this context which speaks of means by which God *saves* us, both rebirth and renewal must be references to conversion, the act by which God gives us justifying faith. “Renewal” sometimes refers to sanctification ([Romans 12:2](#)), but the context here requires that it refers to justification. This reinforces the conclusion that *παλιγγενεσίας* and *ἀνακαινώσεως* are being used in synonymous parallelism, and that *ἀνακαινώσεως* is not explanatory of *παλιγγενεσίας*. If *ἀνακαινώσεως* were an explanatory or exegetical genitive, a more unusual or difficult term would be used to explain a

clearer, more ordinary term. If, on the other hand, ἀνακαινώσεως is pressed into service to provide a synonymous parallel to παλιγγενεσίας, a rare word is being used to provide the second member of a parallelism—a very common occurrence.

We have seen that the construction which Paul chose to use in [Titus 3:5](#) and which John used in [John 3:5](#) both place the Holy Spirit and the washing of baptism into a coordinate, parallel relationship. However, neither the grammatical construction nor the chiasmic structure of [Titus 3:5](#) reveal the precise nature of the relationship between the washing and the Spirit. It is only the context of Scripture which enables us to conclude that washing and the Spirit are not two separate causes, which work independently, but a primary and a secondary cause which are joined together in one action. The Holy Spirit works rebirth in me through the washing of baptism which is his instrument for working faith.

The [translation](#) of *God's Word* (formerly the NET and GWN), which I became aware of only after I had written this article, correctly brings out this truth with its rendering: “He saved us through the washing in which the Holy Spirit gives us new birth and renewal.” This [translation](#) has the virtue of making it clear that both the washing and the Spirit are agents through which a change is worked in us. This interpretation, however, cannot be deduced from the grammatical construction nor from the chiasmic arrangement, which merely place the washing and the Spirit into a coordinate relationship. Since the construction of [John 3:5](#) and [Titus 3:5](#) emphasize the parallelism of washing and Spirit as agents, rather than the subordination of washing as a tool of the Spirit, I believe the best [translation](#) is one which retains the coordinate relationship chosen by the inspired author: “God saved us through the washing which works rebirth and through the Holy Spirit who works renewal.” Paul chose a construction which emphasizes the parallel role of washing and the Spirit. Indeed, his construction places “washing” in an emphatic position. It seems wisest for the [translator](#) to retain Paul’s construction and emphasis here, at least in [translations](#) which are intended to clarify the Greek usage, such as those that appear in commentaries.

To understand a Scripture passage properly an interpreter needs a knowledge of both grammar and the context of Scripture, but it is the knowledge of the context which is most important. Knowledge of Greek grammar suggests to the reader that two of the genitives in [Titus 3:5](#) are objects of διὰ and two of them function as adjectives modifying the two objects. (It also allows the possibility of a three-link chain of genitives, as discussed above.) But it is only his knowledge of the context of Scripture which enables the interpreter to reach a proper understanding of the prepositional phrase. Even if the interpreter would reverse the function of the two genitive pairs and render “a washing rebirth and a Holy Spirit renewal,” the meaning of the passage would not be changed, since the context of Scripture will lead him to the conclusion this is a rebirth worked by washing and a renewal worked by the Holy Spirit. A proper understanding of the context will produce the correct understanding of the teaching.

Incidentally, this passage also serves as an apt illustration of the dilemma which regularly confronts every [translator](#). If the [translator](#) keeps the chiasmic word order, “the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit,” he obscures the parallelism. If he catches the right nuance of the parallelism, “through the washing which works rebirth and through the Holy Spirit who works renewal,” he sacrifices the chiasmic word order. In this case, as in most others, the correct shade of meaning is

more important than the chiastic word order.

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