

Rhetoric at the Boundaries

The Art and Theology of the New
Testament Chain-Link Transitions

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Contents

Preface	ix
1 Introduction	1
2 The Rhetoricians' Recommendations	11
3 Chain-Link Interlock among Other Ancient Rhetorical Devices	21
4 The Anatomy of Chain-Link Interlock	43
5 Ancient Examples of Chain-Link Interlock	59
6 Chain-Link Interlock and the Logic of Romans	85
7 Chain-Link Interlock and the Structure of the Apocalypse	103
8 Chain-Link Interlock and the Theology of the Fourth Gospel	121
9 Chain-Link Interlock and the Narrative of Acts	165
10 Chain-Link Interlock and the Interpretation of Acts	215
11 Conclusions	253
Works Cited	259
Index of Biblical and Ancient Sources	283
Index of Authors	301

Preface

The roots of this research project go back to the early 1990s when I first started teaching in Durham England. While preparing for a course on John, I came across a few sentences about chain-link construction in John 12 in Charles Talbert's book *Reading John* (London: SPCK, 1992, pp. 179–80). The construction was intriguing and I lodged it in the back of my mind as something to consider further in relation to other passages of the New Testament. In the mid-1990s while teaching at Cambridge, I first started putting ideas down on paper. But it wasn't until a one-year research period was afforded to me in 2002–2003 by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung in Germany that I was able to explore the subject to the extent that it deserves, and to that renowned institution I express my thanks for its generosity.

During my time in Germany, Professors Martin Hengel and Herman Lichtenberger of Tübingen expressed keen interest in my research. At that same time, Dr. David Hester contributed significantly to the development of my ideas in his weekly examinations of my progress over coffee in some of Tübingen's quaint cafés, while Chrissy Hester managed their family. The research was aided by discussions with friends passing through Tübingen: Dr. Rick Beaton, Dr. Markus Bockmuehl, Dr. Mark Elliott, Dr. Darrell Hannah, Dr. David Horrell, Dr. David Kupp, Dr. John Proctor, Dr. Dan Wallace. To these scholars and friends I am deeply appreciative of their interaction and encouragement.

Upon returning to my academic post with the University of St. Andrews, I benefited greatly from bi-weekly discussions of the project with St. Andrews Ph.D. candidates who committed themselves to reading the text chapter by chapter and commenting on it: Gary Colledge, Kate Donahoe, Mark Gignilliat, Mickey Klink, Darian Lockett, Al

Lukaszewski, Matt Marohl, and Carl Mosser. Seeing how the text was being read by early readers has helped me to improve it for later readers. And Dr. Nathan MacDonald, a former student who is now a colleague, has on two occasions pointed me to Old Testament data that I would not otherwise have known and that supports my thesis. So my thanks obviously go to all of these colleagues for their efforts and insights.

Along the way, chapters of this book were presented at a variety of seminars and conferences: the New Testament Seminar of the University of Cambridge, the Institut zur Erforschung des Urchristentums at the University of Tübingen, the Greco-Roman World of the New Testament seminar of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS), and the British New Testament Conference. Engagement with colleagues in these contexts has considerably spurred me on to consider issues in new depth and dimension, so I am much in their debt.

My appreciation must also be extended to the anonymous readers of the manuscript for Baylor University Press, whose suggestions have improved the finished product. And the same is true for the executive editor of Baylor University Press, Dr. Carey C. Newman, whose understanding of the worlds of academia and publishing is simply second to none. My appreciation also goes to Diane Smith of Baylor University Press, whose oversight of this book's production was impeccable, and to Kate Donahoe and Mickey Klink who kindly prepared the indexes.

I would be remiss not to salute the members of my growing little family: Callum, our thriving son, full of fun and mischief, whose attention to detail (at least when it comes to having fun or listening to music) is an object lesson to this aspiring academic; to Torrin, a gift of new life, being just three days old as I write this (12 April 2004); and especially to my wife Fiona, whose energy and support simply know no bounds. This book is dedicated to her, as a tribute to our continuing friendship and love.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

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- §1.1 Tracing the Explanation of a New Testament Issue
 - §1.2 Transitions as Key Rhetorical Components
 - §1.3 The Focus of This Study: Chain-Link Transitions
 - §1.4 The Contribution of This Study: Structure, Theology,
History
 - §1.5 The Triangulation of Evidence
 - §1.6 The Character of This Study: Further Matters
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§1.1 Tracing the Explanation of a New Testament Issue

A plethora of structural patterns can be observed within New Testament texts. One of those patterns has consistently baffled New Testament interpreters. This itself is somewhat curious since the pattern (1) appears in a number of New Testament books and (2) usually occurs more than once in any given book. These two simple observations might well have caused interpreters to consider whether in fact the pattern would have been easily recognisable to those who wrote and first heard these texts. For the most part, however, interpreters have failed to pursue issues of this sort.

Curiosity on this score increases in view of two terse but suggestive references to this structural pattern in the works of Graeco-Roman

rhetoricians, who commended the pattern to those interested in effective presentation of their ideas. Curiosity mounts even further in view of claims by interpreters of the Old Testament that the same pattern appears in the Hebrew Scriptures with some frequency, suggesting that the pattern had currency much earlier than the Graeco-Roman world of the New Testament. In fact, the pattern seems to be rooted in the oral patterning of the ancient world in general, rather than simply being a phenomenon of the Graeco-Roman world in particular.

Data of this kind have consistently been overlooked by New Testament interpreters. When New Testament passages animated by this particular structural pattern are revisited against this backdrop, they are not to be seen as involving problematical structural anomalies. Instead they are shown to be important structural landmarks, full of interpretative potential that has remained untapped and unexplored thus far in the guild of New Testament scholarship.

This, in a nutshell, comprises the interests of the study that follows. The particular structure that will be the focus of attention is a transitional feature, outlined briefly in §1.3 below. Initially, however, it is appropriate to highlight more generally the structural significance of transitions in relation to the interpretation of texts.

§1.2 *Transitions as Key Rhetorical Components*

With the recent proliferation of methodological disciplines in biblical study, the examination of structural relationships in biblical texts has proved to be an important enterprise within various interpretative approaches. According to some practitioners of discourse analysis¹ and rhetorical analysis,² for instance, the discovery of textual structure aids interpretation by outlining textual cohesion and persuasive development, or by revealing a text's artistic and aesthetic qualities. Repeatedly, structural analyses have brought home the crucial interplay between the formal features of a text and the interpretation of its content.

In this regard, one of the most important structural features is the transition marker. A well-constructed transition oils the machinery of rhetorical persuasion, indicating that a new line of thought is beginning

¹ E.g., L. P. Louw, "Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament," *Bible Translator* 24 (1973): 108–18; E. A. Nida, *Componential Analysis of Meaning* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989), 230–56.

² E.g., J. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980); D. A. Black, "The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style, and Ethics in Romans 12:9–21," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 1 (1989): 3–21.

and occasionally giving some indication as to the content of the new topic and how it relates to what has gone previously. Transitional units often play a critical role in the process of interpreting a text. For instance, in his work on the structure of Hebrews, George Guthrie notes: “One of the most neglected topics in discussions on the structure of Hebrews is the author’s use of various transition techniques.”³ In an accompanying footnote Guthrie adds: “This neglect, perhaps more than any other factor, accounts for the tremendous diversity in current outlines of Hebrews.” In Guthrie’s view, then, undervaluing the import of textual transitions has the potential of skewing one’s broader understanding of a text’s flow. This coheres with George Kennedy’s first rule of thumb when interpreting the New Testament through rhetorical criticism: the first step in textual analysis is the determination of rhetorical units, which are marked out as such within the text.⁴ Transitions at text-unit boundaries play a role in identifying precisely those rhetorical units.

Where text units meet, one can expect to find a transition from one to the other. This, at least, is the case for the most literary of texts, and it is usually the case for those that would aspire to be among that number.⁵ As Philip Tite notes, “[t]he transitional elements of a document are . . . elements of ancient rhetoric. That is, rhetoric, as a form of persuasive argumentation, seriously took the transitional flow of the discourse into consideration.”⁶

The rhetoricians’ marked interest in transitions should not be surprising. In helping to demarcate different rhetorical units within an orator’s speech or the different text units within a literary work, transitions play a fundamental communicative role. Whereas the anonymous rhetorical handbook *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (ca. 85 BCE) speaks of there being five parts to rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory), the ancient rhetoricians seemed to think of transitional effectiveness as falling most naturally within the category of style. So, the rhetoricians spoke of the need to win over an audience by enhancing the

³ G. H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text Linguistic Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 57.

⁴ G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

⁵ Contra R. A. Horsley (*Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], p. 68), the simple markers “and” (καί), “and immediately” (καὶ εὐθύς) or “and again” (καὶ πάλιν) that characterise so many transitions in the Markan Gospel would probably not have overly impressed the ancient rhetors whose works are extant and for whom transitions were of critical importance.

⁶ P. L. Tite, *Compositional Transitions in 1 Peter: An Analysis of the Letter-Opening* (London: International Scholars, 1997), 23.

“affective” component of communication. In this regard, Quintilian (95 CE) spoke of the need to charm and delight one’s audience by one’s style, so that they might surrender themselves to the case that is being made (*Inst.* 9.4.129). It is important for our purposes to note that Quintilian speaks about the affective function of style precisely when discussing a particular *transitional* construction, suggesting that transitions have a part to play in the charming and delighting of one’s audience through stylistic means.

If transitions can be considered a subset within the category of rhetorical *style*, they also are related to other categories within the rhetorical taxonomy of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. So, impressive transitions help to endear one’s audience to one’s case by assisting (1) in the demarcation of the *arrangement* of one’s presentation, (2) in the ease of its *delivery*, and (3) in the ease of its retention by an audience (i.e., *memory*). Since transitions play a key role in these rhetorical parts in predominantly oral/aural contexts, it is crucial that their place and function within a speech or text is recognised if those presentations are to be properly appreciated.

§1.3 *The Focus of This Study: Chain-Link Transitions*

It has been suggested above that transitional markers fall especially well (but not exclusively) within the category of rhetorical style. It is important, then, to heed Stanley Porter’s advice about the need to relate a text’s stylistic features to its substance:

[M]any studies of style (or ornamentation) have treated the individual [stylistic] elements in isolation and often as merely ornamental, in other words, as individual literary features that contribute little to the substance or content of a passage, but are included only for aesthetic value. . . . [But] so far as the ancients were concerned, stylistic matters were not simply for decorative value but were part of the way in which substance was conveyed. . . . More must be done to treat the stylistic features, not in isolation but in terms of their coordinated use within an entire passage, or even an entire book.⁷

Furthermore, the question that A. H. Snyman asks of stylistic devices in general can be applied specifically to transitional devices within texts: “In what way do these devices promote the communication of [the author’s] message and how do they contribute to the impact and appeal of his argumentations?”⁸

⁷ S. E. Porter, “The Theoretical Justification for Application of Rhetorical Categories to Pauline Epistolary Literature,” in *Rhetorica and the New Testament* (ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 100–22, esp. 116–17.

⁸ A. H. Snyman, “Style and Meaning in Romans 8:31–39,” *Neot* 18 (1984): 94.

In the chapters that follow, issues of this sort will be pursued in relation to one of the many transitional methods evident within ancient texts. Described by the first-century rhetorician Quintilian and the second-century rhetorician Lucian of Samosata, this technique involves the overlapping of material at a text-unit boundary in order to facilitate a transition. This interlocking transition technique (whose form and function are discussed in chapters 2–4 below) is likened by Lucian to the manner in which a chain is constructed, with its individual links overlapping in order to form a connected and continuous whole. This study most frequently makes use of Lucian’s analogy in its nomenclature, referring to “chain-link transition,” “chain-link interlock,” “chain-link construction” or simply “chain link” when studying a New Testament passage in which this feature occurs. Occasionally I will refer to it as “text-unit interlock” or simply “interlock.”

To date, no one has engaged in an in-depth study of the appearance and significance of this transitional feature within New Testament texts (not to mention texts of antiquity in general). So for instance, in his 1961 book on Lucian of Samosata and the New Testament,⁹ Hans Dieter Betz concerned himself with the religio-historical and paraenetic parallels between Lucian and selected New Testament texts (as his subtitle announced) without interesting himself in the rhetorical features that Lucian prescribed. Similarly, in his 1993 book comparing features of Quintilian and Luke, Robert Morgenthaler’s attention focussed on features other than text-unit interlock.¹⁰ The most indepth study of chain-link interlock in the New Testament is a twelve-page study of Acts carried out in the mid-70s by Jacques Dupont.¹¹ As will be shown in §10.2, however, 40 percent of Dupont’s findings are skewed, and the 60 percent that have merit still fail to do justice to all occurrences of chain-link construction within Acts. Occasionally text-unit interlock is discussed in a paragraph or sentence pertaining to a particular passage.¹² Almost as frequently, however, scholars find chain-link interlock in

⁹ H. D. Betz, *Lukian von Samosata und das neue Testament: religionsgeschichtliche und paränetische Parallelen* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961).

¹⁰ R. Morgenthaler, *Lukas und Quintilian: Rhetorik als Erzählkunst* (Zürich: Gotthelf, 1993).

¹¹ J. Dupont, “La question du plan des Actes des Apôtres à la Lumière d’un Texte de Lucien de Samosate,” *NTS* 21 (1974–75): 220–31; repr. in *Nouvelles Études sur les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1984), 24–36.

¹² Cf. C. H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 179–80; F. Ó Fearghail, *The Introduction to Luke-Acts: A Study of the Role of Lk 1,1–4,44 in the Composition of Luke’s Two-Volume Work* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991), 77 n. 197.

passages where interlock is not in fact apparent.¹³ My aims in this project, then, are (1) to give clarity to the form, character, and function of chain-link interlock, (2) to cite instances of its occurrence within selected Pauline, Johannine, and Lukan texts, and (3) to study the consequent structural, theological, and/or historical aspects that arise from such occurrences within New Testament texts.

§1.4 *The Contribution of This Study: Structure, Theology, History*

It is hoped that the contribution of this book does not lie simply in the fact that a study of this topic has never been undertaken in any significant depth previously. Instead, the primary contribution lies in the broader implications that arise in relation to the identification of fifteen cases of chain-link interlock in the New Testament. In particular, as noted in the third aim above, the implications converge particularly in relation to three primary areas of interest: structure, theology, and history.

With regard to *structural significance*, it will be shown that several New Testament passages that have frequently been thought to involve structural clutter and disorder are in fact text-book cases of first-class style being animated by chain-link construction. The consequences of this are at least two-fold. First, the New Testament authors have not lost control of their arguments, as is commonly suggested by scholars in some of the passages studied here. An ancient rhetor who lost control of the structure of his argument proved himself to be a second-rate rhetor, thereby undermining the effectiveness of his own argument. For instance, with regard to Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, interpreters frequently either intimate or explicitly suggest that Paul has lost control of his argumentative structure at various places in the presentation. Rarely do those same interpreters entertain the consequent implication of this assessment—that structural deficiencies of this sort would have been perceived as damaging Paul's credentials as someone who deserves his audience's attention. It will be demonstrated in chapter 6 below that three of those instances of an apparently defective structure actually involve chain-link construction (§6.2, §6.3, and §6.4). Consequently, since the passages themselves are not structurally defective, neither can these instances be interpreted as instances in which Paul lost control of his presentation.

Second, the recognition of chain-link interlock within certain passages offers interpreters a viable alternative to the oft-times extreme views concerning the compositional history of some New Testament

¹³ E.g., R. J. Dillon, "The Spirit as Taskmaster and Troublemaker in Romans 8," *CBQ* 60 (1999): 682–702, esp. 701.

texts. For instance, all too often perceived structural “anomalies” have been attributed to the interfering influence of later redactors or scribes who introduced irregularities into the original author’s text. Most famously, R. H. Charles noted structural oddities in the book of Revelation and attributed them to the work of an “unintelligent” and “shallow-brained” redactor who suffered from “hopeless mental confusion” and was “profoundly stupid and ignorant.”¹⁴ I. T. Beckwith, a contemporary of Charles, differed from him in attributing such passages to the text’s main author, but thought that the text itself revealed the rather “irregular” mind of its author.¹⁵ What such views usually demonstrate, however, is simply the ignorance of scholars concerning the existence and function of non-linear chain-link interlock. This will be demonstrated in relation to passages from both the book of Revelation (§7.1–§7.3) and Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome (§6.2, §6.4).

Moreover, it will be shown that the author of the Acts of the Apostles (i.e., “Luke”) made fourfold use of chain-link interlock throughout its twenty-eight chapters. On the likelihood that those four transitions signal the start of major text-units, a relatively unique proposal regarding the structure of the Acts of the Apostles will be advanced (esp. §10.2 in relation to §9.1–§9.4). Similarly, in relation to the book of Revelation, it will be shown that chain-link transitions hold together the central narrative concerning the eschatological outworking of God (§7.6, §7.7, and §7.8), thereby enhancing the impression of structural and narrative coherence.

With regard to *theological significance*, it will be shown that chain-link interlock frequently plays a key role in an author’s attempt to demarcate his theological itinerary and pathways. For instance, chain-link interlock offered the author(s) of the Johannine Gospel the opportunity to assemble a collection of primary themes in a condensed fashion at main structural junctions in that Gospel (§8.1–§8.9). Through the technique of chain-link interlock, prime structural ground draws to itself key Johannine themes in crystallised fashion, providing the interpretative lens through which to view the major text-units on either side of the interlock. In this manner, the principal chain-link interlock of the Johannine Gospel functions virtually as a condensed miniature of that Gospel. As will be shown in §8.4, it also serves to preclude certain literary and theological readings, while enhancing others.

In chapter 7, it will be seen that the book of Revelation incorporates chain-link construction in a manner that “democratises” the promul-

¹⁴ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 1:1 and 1:xviii respectively.

¹⁵ I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), 771.

gation of apocalyptic mysteries among the “common” people of God (§7.3, §7.5, and §7.8). In this way, the book of Revelation includes an implicit criticism of a popular tradition in which apocalyptic mysteries are thought to be unhelpful to those uninitiated into the group of the select few among whom such mysteries are properly handled and understood. For the author of the book of Revelation, knowledge of the intricate mysteries of God is relevant to the ordinary person of faith, whose life is to be impacted by the revelation of those mysteries. This point is accentuated by means of the formation of a new genre, with the book of Revelation embodying a generic hybrid (i.e., an apocalyptic epistle) that is created by means of the author’s use of chain-link interlock.

A similar connection between a text’s structure and its author’s theological commitments will be evident in Luke’s structuring of Acts by means of chain-link interlock. From that structure emerges a theology intent on bolstering confidence in the God whose power Luke depicts as promoting the inevitable advance of the Christian movement (§10.3). The same construction also undergirds Luke’s theology of scriptural fulfilment and promotes his confidence in the reliability of Jesus. So, too, while the identity of the “I” who speaks in Romans 7 has been extensively debated, it will be shown that Paul’s use of chain-link construction in that chapter assists in the definition of this central character in Paul’s theological presentation (§6.2).

With regard to *historical significance*, it will be shown that recognising the position of chain-link interlock in the narrative of Acts casts fresh light on the thorny issues surrounding the attempt to reconstruct the life of Paul (§10.4). Moreover, in relation to the Johannine Gospel it will be shown that its two chain-link interlocks have undergone contrasting fates in the process of the Gospel’s own compositional history (§8.8).

This foreshadowing of things to come in the chapters that follow already illustrates one important feature with regard to chain-link interlock: ancient authors made use of it in a variety of ways towards a variety of ends. Although an overlapping structure consistently lies behind all of the examples analysed below, and although a common purpose unites all of them (i.e., to signal a transition from one text-unit to the next), that interlocked structure itself performs a diverse number of further functions in the various contexts in which it appears. The texts studied here offer little indication that their authors employed chain-link interlock in a mindless, “cookie-cutter” fashion simply as a transitional indicator (although it certainly played that role). Instead, those authors regularly took the occasion to infuse chain-link interlock, an otherwise basic transitional phenomenon, with notable interpretative significance.

§1.5 *The Triangulation of Evidence*

In view of the paucity of studies given to the study of chain-link interlock, a double duty is placed upon this project. That is, it needs to demonstrate both (1) the existence of chain-link construction in the ancient world, and (2) how an awareness of that construction can assist in the interpretation of texts. With regard to demonstrating the existence of chain-link in the ancient world, this project is not reliant on one arena of evidence but on three: (1) first- and second-century Graeco-Roman rhetoricians (assembled in chapter 2); (2) sources antecedent to or contemporary with the New Testament (assembled in chapter 5); and (3) the New Testament itself (assembled in chapters 6–10). The evidential basis for this study, then, involves a triangulation of evidence from three different arenas. This process of triangulation affords chain-link construction better credentials than, say, chiasmic construction or diatribe, since neither chiasm nor diatribe have a foothold in the rhetorical handbooks prior to the fourth century CE (when chiasm first appears), despite their currency in literary texts prior to that date (these issues are considered in §2.1 below). Consequently chain-link construction will be shown to have support from three triangulated evidential databases that reinforce each other in demonstrating not only that chain-link construction was a viable transitional feature in the ancient world but also that an awareness of chain-link construction is an important interpretative tool that has for too long been left out of the toolbox of New Testament interpreters.

§1.6 *The Character of This Study: Further Matters*

The survey of texts that appears in the following chapters is not intended to be an exhaustive study of all the relevant New Testament texts in which chain-link interlock appears. I have been led to the fifteen examples by way of my own interests and experience of study over the past few years, while the outline of this project has been developing. So, while the book of Revelation and the Johannine Gospel are analysed below (§7.1–§7.8, and §8.1–§8.9 respectively), the Johannine epistles are not. Neither are the synoptic Gospels considered here (except for the end of the Lukan Gospel). The Book of Acts is studied intensively in chapters 9 and 10. Although Paul's letter to the Romans is part of the analysis (§6.2–§6.6), the rest of the Pauline corpus has not been a part of this study, except for one instance in 1 Corinthians (§6.1). The Petrine corpus is not considered, nor is Jude or Hebrews, although Guthrie's

structural analysis suggests the presence of a kind of chain-link construction in at least one place within Hebrews.¹⁶

The following chapters are, to a certain extent, self-standing and can be read independently of the others, and perhaps in any order. Having familiarised themselves with the form, character, and function of chain-link interlock in chapters 2–4, readers interested in the use of this technique in the Johannine Gospel, for instance, may want to consult chapter 8 thereafter, while those interested in the use of this construction in Luke-Acts may want to consult chapters 9–10. It should be pointed out, however, that chapters 6 and 7 offer nine New Testament examples in relatively quick succession (from Paul and Revelation) and demonstrate the way in which cognisance of chain-link interlock would have avoided interpretative pitfalls in the history of New Testament scholarship. For that reason, these two chapters offer accessible entry points into the study of chain-link interlock prior to the more complex argumentation of chapters 8, 9, and 10. Chapter 5 is another accessible entry point into the subject, providing examples of the appearance of chain-link construction in a spattering of ancient texts beyond the New Testament. The final section of chapter 5 (§5.10) reviews the findings and their relevance for the chapters that follow.

Throughout this book, wherever reference to a previous argument is made, the section heading is clearly marked for ease of reference (e.g., “§4.1”). The New Testament translation used here is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), except in a few instances where I have preferred to translate the passage alternatively. Those cases are noted. Moreover, wherever quotations of primary or secondary literature appear in the main body of the text in languages other than English (i.e., Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, French), in most cases I have tried to ensure that (1) a translation can be found nearby, (2) the quotation’s content is obvious from my comments surrounding it, or (3) the gist of my argument is clear even without the supporting quotation.

With these matters in view, the first point of evidential triangulation can now be surveyed: the references to transitional interlock in the Graeco-Roman rhetoricians.

¹⁶ Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews*, 108–9, where Hebrews 2:5–9 is discussed under the descriptor “the woven intermediary transition,” which in our terms would simply be a complex chain-link transition.