

## Short Study

# Taking up and Raising, Fixing and Loosing: A Chiasmic Wordplay in Acts 2.23b–24.

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**This article identifies a structural and conceptual chiasm within the description of Jesus' death and resurrection in Acts 2.23b–24, which helps to account for the distinctive elements of the passage.**

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The kerygmatic contrast pattern in Acts 2.23b–24 contains several distinctive features. The verb *προσπήγνυμι* is a *hapax* within the Greek Bible, and the use of *ἀνίστημι* rather than *ἐγείρω* departs from normal Lukan usage.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the description of God 'loosing the pangs of death' is unparalleled among the resurrection statements in the speeches of Acts. Commentators have universally numbered Acts 2.23b–24 among the contrast formulae of the speeches of Acts (cf. 2.36; 4.10; 5.30; 10.39–40; 13.27–30),<sup>2</sup> and critical discussion of the passage has typically focused upon the tradition-historical development of the contrast formulae and the likely background to the 'pangs of death' imagery.<sup>3</sup> In the present analysis, I would like to call attention to a structural and conceptual chiasm in Acts 2.23b–24, suggesting that an awareness of Peter's turn of phrase helps to account for the unique language and imagery of the passage.

1 Luke certainly employs *ἀνίστημι* with reference to the resurrection at certain points in Acts (Acts 2.32; 13.33–34; 17.3, 31). Nonetheless, in the contrast formulae, *ἐγείρω* is typically the verb employed for the raising of Jesus from the dead (cf. Acts 4.10; 10.40; 13.30).

2 See, for example, J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985) 50; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. ed. 1988) 123; D. Marguerat, *Les Actes des Apôtres 1–12* (CNT; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007) 90; D. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 147.

3 See, for example, L. Schenke, 'Die Kontrastformel Apg 4,10b', *Biblische Zeitschrift* 26 (1982) 15–16; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 143–4; L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992) 51.

In his address to the ‘Men of Israel’ (Acts 2.22), Peter utilizes a clever play on words to describe the death and resurrection of Jesus (2.23b-24). The apostle preaches of how his listeners ‘took up’ (ἀναίρέω) Jesus, ‘fixing him (to a cross)’ (προσπήγνυμι). This action is then overturned by God, who ‘raised up’ (ἀνίστημι) Jesus, ‘loosing’ (λύω) the pangs of death, because it was not possible for the pangs of death to ‘hold’ (κρατέω) him. Peter’s juxtaposition of human and divine activity is expressed through a tightly worded chiasmic sequence:

**Chart 1 – The Chiasmic Pattern in Acts 2.23b-24**

A τοῦτον...διὰ χειρὸς ἀνόμων **προσπήξαντες**  
 B **ἀνείλατε**,  
 B<sub>1</sub> ὃν ὁ θεὸς **ἀνέστησεν**  
 A<sub>1</sub> **λύσας** τὰς ὠδῖνας τοῦ θανάτου...

The two finite verbs, ἀνείλατε and ἀνέστησεν, form the fulcrum of the contrast pattern (B, B<sub>1</sub>). The two verbs share identical prefixes and a four-syllable word length with accents upon the antepenultimate syllable, resulting in a rhythmic alliteration.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the overlapping semantic range of the two verbs may enable the reader to perceive a double entendre in the use of ἀναίρέω. On the one hand, in the present context the verb most obviously denotes the murderous activity of those who killed Jesus, in keeping with Luke’s most common usage of ἀναίρέω to describe intentional acts of violence.<sup>5</sup> As such, ἀναίρέω is the conceptual counterpart to ἀνίστημι, which is employed in the present context to describe the raising of Jesus from the dead. At the same time, ἀναίρέω can also be translated ‘to take up’, and so the verb can describe activities of lifting in a manner quite similar to the transitive use of ἀνίστημι. Indeed, the narrator of Acts is aware of the alternative connotations of ἀναίρέω, for the dual meanings of the verb are juxtaposed in Stephen’s description of the life of Moses in Acts 7.21, 28.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the use of ἀναίρέω together with ἀνίστημι in Acts 2.23b-24 may entail a pun which plays upon the double meaning of ἀναίρέω. Jesus was ‘taken up’ by men only to be ‘raised up’ by God, as two verbs with a shared semantic range are placed side by side in opposition.

The two contrasting finite verbs are then bracketed by a pair of contrasting participles, προσπήξαντες and λύσας (A, A<sub>1</sub>). While the compound

4 R. Pervo calls attention to the pervasive alliteration throughout this passage, yet he does not mention the structural or conceptual chiasm in vv. 23b and 24 (*Acts: A Commentary* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2008] 80).

5 See Luke 22.2; 23.32; Acts 5.33, 36; 7.28; 9.23-24, 29; 12.2; 13.28; 16.27; 23.15, 21, 27; 25.3; 26.10.

6 The daughter of Pharaoh ‘took up’ the infant Moses and nurtured him as her own son (7.21), but when Moses as an adult intervenes in a dispute among two Israelites, one of the men asks Moses if he wishes to ‘kill’ him as Moses ‘killed’ the Egyptian (7.28).

προσπήγνυμι does not appear elsewhere in the Greek Bible, the root πήγνυμι is found throughout the LXX, where it most often describes the act of fixing an object into place. Hence, the verb can refer to ‘pitching’ one’s tent (Gen 26.25; Isa 54.2; cf. Heb 8.2), ‘fastening’ an object to a stationary foundation (Judg 4.21; 16.14; 2 Sam 21.10), or ‘impaling’ an individual upon a stake (Ezra 6.11). The prefix προσ- may underscore the directional force of the verb, though Peter’s statement in Acts 2.23b lacks any prepositional phrase specifying the object to which Jesus was ‘fixed’. Still, προσπήγνυμι naturally contrasts with the participial form of its counterpart, λύω, ‘to loose’. Though Jesus was fixed to a cross by the hands of lawless men, the pangs of death have been loosed from Jesus by God.

In this manner, a chiasmic pattern emerges within Acts 2.23b-24, by which the human opposition against Jesus is shown to be futile in light of God’s vindicating activity on Jesus’ behalf. The chiasm is both structural (participle, verb, verb, participle) and conceptual (fixing, taking up to death, raising to life, loosing). Moreover, the chiasmic wordplay in Acts 2.23b-24 helps to account for the passage’s numerous peculiarities in relation to similar formulae in the apostolic sermons.

Hence, among the contrast formulae of Acts, the means of Jesus’ execution is also specified through participial phrases in 5.30 and 10.39, where the language of Deut 21.23 is utilized to refer to Jesus being ‘hanged upon a tree’ (κρεμάσαντες ἐπὶ ξύλου). However, the use of προσπήγνυμι in Acts 2.23b is unique, and its appearance in this context is most readily explained by its opposition to λύω. Likewise, the description of the resurrection with ἀνίστημι modified by a participial phrase is also unique to Acts 2.24. Typically, the contrast formulae of Acts describe the resurrection with a different finite verb (ἐγείρω—4.10; 5.30; 10.40; 13.30), which is occasionally followed by a prepositional phrase (10.40; 13.30). The substitution of ἀνίστημι for ἐγείρω in Acts 2.24 allows for the alliteration and wordplay with ἀνοιρέω, and the presence of the participial phrase modifying the finite verb completes the chiasmic pattern of participle (A), finite verb (B), finite verb (B<sub>1</sub>), participle (A<sub>1</sub>).

Additionally, the imagery of ‘loosing the pangs of death’ is likely employed in this context on account of the chiasmic structure of the passage. Many commentators locate the background to the ‘pangs of death’ in 2 Sam 22.6; Pss 17.5-6 LXX; 114.3 LXX.<sup>7</sup> In these passages, the Hebrew לְבָבָה, (‘cords’) is translated as ὠδῖνες (‘birth-pangs’), perhaps reflecting a misreading of לְבָבָה as לְבָבָה (‘birth-pangs’). These Septuagintal echoes may account for the tradition-historical origins of

7 Barrett, *Acts*, 143; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 256; J. Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (MeyerK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 146; Marguerat, *Les Actes*, 91.

the ‘pangs of death’ expression.<sup>8</sup> However, the imagery of loosing and binding in relation to ‘birth-pangs’ (ὠδίνεις) is not limited to the mistranslation of לָצַח within the LXX, as the affliction of ‘birth-pangs’ is often conceived in such terms throughout the OT. Job 39.2 LXX, for instance, employs λύω in connection with ὠδίνεις in a manner similar to the expression in Acts 2.24. Furthermore, the affliction of ‘birth-pangs’ is described with the verb κατακρατέω in Micah 4.9 and Jer 50.43 LXX, which corresponds with the usage of κρατέω with reference to the ‘pangs of death’ in Acts 2.24. Hence, the reference to ‘loosing the pangs of death’ in Peter’s sermon might reflect a Septuagintal manner of speaking, yet it may not be intended as an allusion to any particular background text.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the usage of this phrase in this particular context is best explained with reference to the chiasmic structure of the passage. The participial form of λύω enables the opposition of προσπήγνυμι and λύω, and even the binary nature of the imagery (birth-pangs vs. death) coheres naturally with the other contrasts in Peter’s statement (e. g. fixing and loosing, killing and raising).

In these respects, the chiasmic pattern within Acts 2.23b-24 is exegetically significant, offering an illuminating vantage point from which to consider the unique language and imagery in the passage. In his inaugural sermon at Jerusalem, Peter’s proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus draws upon the characteristic contrast pattern found throughout the apostolic kerygma in the speeches of Acts. Yet the alliterative chiasm of Acts 2.23b-24 makes the contrast between human and divine activity in the death of Jesus even more striking, effectively exposing the inability of Jesus’ detractors to thwart the purposes of God.

8 Rather than ‘pangs of death’, Pervo prefers the Western variant (τὰς ὠδίνιας τοῦ ἔθου), giving much weight to the evidence from Polycarp *Phil.* 1.2 (Pervo, *Acts*, 81-2). The difference in meaning is immaterial.

9 See Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 51.