Chiasm in relation to the exegesis of Rom 14:20

(Iver Larsen, 2007, Revised November 2026)

There is an exegetical problem in Rom 14:20 where almost all English versions have taken one side and many European versions have taken the other. In addition, the standard NT lexicon by Walter Bauer has suggested the interpretation followed in most of Europe, especially in Germany and Northern Europe. But the BAGD lexicon, which is the English translation and modification of Bauer's lexicon, had added a parenthesis which is not in the German edition. It thereby suggests the opposite interpretation from Bauer in order to support the traditional English interpretations.

Since the traditional English interpretation is often supported by references to logical flow, coherence in terms of topic and participants and context, it is important to consider how this passage is arranged in its literary form as a chiasm.

The purpose of this article is to show that the original lexicon by Bauer and the European tradition and the corresponding European traditional interpretation is more likely to be correct from both a grammatical and literary viewpoint than the prevailing English tradition.

I shall first give an overview of the chiasm and then discuss the exegetical problem in 14:20.

Rom 14:13b-21 as a chiasm

Several chiastic structures have been noted in Romans, for instance 2:6-11[1]. I was alerted to the one in chapter 14 by the commentary on Romans by Douglas Moo.[2] The following outline is an expansion of Moo's suggested structure.

Before outlining the chiasm, a comment on transitional verses is needed. Both Luke and Paul commonly use transitional verses and this causes difficulties for Bible translators and commentators in search of section breaks. A transitional verse has two parts. The first part is a summary of the preceding section and therefore thematically belongs to that section. The second part is an introduction of the theme of the following section and therefore thematically belongs to the following section. The result is that we are tempted to put a section break in the middle of the verse or even worse in the middle of a sentence.

Romans 14:13 is such a transition verse. It says in RSV[3]: "Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." 14:13a is a brief summary of the longer summary in 14:10-12. It is an exhortation about what not to do. It is followed by an exhortation about what to do instead: "avoid causing a brother to stumble." This second exhortation is the theme of the rest of the section to the end of the chapter.

Some Christians are called "strong" (15:1), and they believe that nothing is unfit for eating for religious reasons. Other Christians are called "weak", and they believe it is wrong to eat certain foods for religious reasons. Paul agrees with the strong in principle, but exhorts them not to make use of their freedom, if that would cause a brother to stumble, that is, to do something which he believes is wrong. The concept of stumble is wellknown in the NT for making a wrong decision or doing something which is considered wrong.

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[1] cf. p. 135 in Moo, Douglass J. (1996). The Epistle to the Romans. NICNT. Eerdmans.

[2] Ibid, p. 850.

[3] All Bible quotations are from RSV unless otherwise noted.

The chiasm can be outlined as follows:

A Do not cause your brother to stumble. v. 13b
B Nothing is in itself wrong to eat, except that it would be wrong for the one who thinks it is wrong. v. 14
C You do not act in love if you by your freedom to eat anything cause a brother for whom Christ died to do wrong. v. 15
D Don't use your freedom to cause spritual damage to other believers. v. 16
E The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what you eat or drink but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. v. 17
D' He who serves God in this way (restraining his own freedom for the sake of others) is pleasing to God and builds up other believers. v. 18-19
C' Do not destroy the "work of God" (i.e. cause your brother to do wrong) by eating certain foods. v. 20a
B' All things are OK to eat, except that it would be evil/wrong for the one who eats while thinking it is wrong. v. 20b
A' Do not eat or drink anything that could cause a brother to do wrong. v. 21

The pointed arrow form of the chiasm puts the spotlight on the key verse 10:17, which briefly summarises the teaching in the section.

The last two verses in the section (22-23) form a hortatory conclusion which says that what you eat or drink is a matter of personal conviction (pistis) and not a normative rule to follow for all Christians. In v. 22 Paul says to the "strong" believer that it is fine and "blessed" to be convinced that nothing is wrong to eat (and Paul includes himself in this group as we can see from v. 14a), because then he has no self condemnation. However, that conviction he can keep to himself and God. In v. 23 Paul describes the "weak" believer as one who eats with scruples and self condemnation. And in a certain sense he is right to condemn himself, because he is eating out of pressure and against his own conviction. Whatever is done against one's own conviction is wrong (sin).

The last two verses also have a chiastic structure as follows:

A You "strong one" have "faith" that you are accepted by God whatever you eat. v. 22a
B He is blessed who can eat without condemning himself. v. 22b
B' He is condemned who eats while condemning himself. v. 23a
A' The "weak one" does not have "faith" and therefore feels not accepted by God for having eating what he feels is a sin to eat.

If we understand this, it should be motivation enough for us to restrain our freedom and not cause a brother to fall into sin.

The exegetical problem in 14:20b

14:20b says in a literal translation: "All things on one hand are clean/fit (to eat), however (on the other hand), it is evil/wrong/a sin to the one who through/while stumbling eats."

There are two options for the intended referent of "the one who eats":
(1) Is it the "strong" who eats something that the "weak" considers sinful to eat and thereby the "strong" causes an offense to the "weak" or
(2) is it the "weak" who through/while stumbling has come to eat something he himself considers sinful to eat.

Those who prefer interpretation (1) point out that Paul has been talking to the ”strong” throughout, and especially the context of v. 21 suggest that he is also talking to the ”strong” in 14:20b. They also point to the English Greek NT lexicon (BAGD) which lists the Greek phrase ”dia proskommatos” as an example under the entry ”dia” (through) and translates it as “with offense (to the scruples of another)”. Since first writing this paper, I have noticed that BAGD has been revised as BDAG, and this revised dictionary has changed the entry for proskomma so that it now reads:

① **act of stumbling,** *stumbling* itself …

ⓑ fig. διὰ προσκόμματος ἐσθίειν- ‘eat and stumble in the process’ **Ro 14:20** (διά A 3c). Some would put this under 2.

② **opportunity to experience inward pain (take offense) or make a misstep,** ***cause for offense, cause for making a misstep…***

ⓑ fig. τιθέναι πρόσκομμα τῷ ἀδελφῷ *give a member an occasion to experience inward pain or offense, put an obstacle in a member’s way* (s. ἀδελφός) **Ro 14:13** (w. σκάνδαλον).[4]

However, even the revised version has not deleted the interpretive parenthesis that was added to the original text of the German dictionary under the influence of English tradition. BDAG still says:

③ **marker of instrumentality or circumstance whereby something is accomplished or effected, *by, via, through…***

ⓒ of attendant or prevailing circumstance … διὰ προσκόμματος *eat with offense* (to the scruples of another) **14:20.**

Those who prefer interpretation (2) point to the chiastic structure and say that both 14 and 20b talk about the same thing, namely that nothing is unfit for eating for religious purposes, but the person who does not share that conviction will do wrong (sin) if he eats it. They also point to the original lexicon by Bauer in German which reads under ”dia” (through) ”mit Anstoss, mit Bedenken essen”. This translates into English as ”to eat with offense, or with scruples.”

From a Greek linguistic point of view, it seems to me that the German Bauer is correct and the English BGAD has taken a liberty with the language that is highly questionable. The preposition ”dia” with genitive as here can refer to ”means” in a means-result relationship, or it can refer to an accompanying circumstance of the action. In this case, the ”stumbling” (proskomma in Greek) is probably best understood as a circumstancial description, that is, the action of eating is closely connected with the action of stumbling. Or in other words, the one who eats is the one who stumbles. But the English interpretation goes a step further and includes the aspect of result, that is, the eating by one person results in the stumbling of another person. I would think that if this was Paul’s intention, he would have said ”towards stumbling” (eis proskomma) rather than ”through/with stumbling” (dia proskommatos).

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[4] Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (882). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.