

SHORTER STUDIES

CHIASM IN THEME AND BY FORM IN REVELATION 18

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My colleague Kenneth Strand has made significant contributions to the literature on the biblical book of Revelation in his studies which have elucidated its chiastic literary structures on both the large and small scale.¹ I find these studies persuasive and am in agreement with him that chiasmus was a literary technique commonly employed throughout this book. The present brief study is presented to lend support to that idea by identifying a chiasm by form in Rev 18 where Strand has already found a chiasm by theme to be present.²

1. *Revelation 18 and the Book's Broad Chiastic Structure*

My personal approach to the study of Rev 18 has come from an examination of its contents according to the position that it occupies in the larger chiastic framework of the book that Strand has outlined. In that outline, the seven last plagues in his eschatological series are balanced by the seven trumpets in his historical series. This seems reasonably clear from the balancing positions in which these passages appear in the literary framework of the book, and from their related contents in terms of the targets for their judgments. Strand has outlined these relations as follows:³

¹Strand's work along these lines is included in the following studies: *Perspectives in the Book of Revelation* (Worthington, Ohio, 1975); *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Naples, Florida, 1979); "Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 401-408; "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 127-135; and "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment as Portrayed in Revelation 18," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 53-59. The present study is written especially in response to the last of these works by Strand.

²See Strand, "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment," pp. 53-57.

³Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, p. 47.

<i>Trumpets</i>		<i>Plagues</i>
8:7	Earth	16:2
8:8	Sea	16:3
8:10	Rivers and Fountains	16:4
8:12	Heavenly Bodies; Sun	16:8
9:2	Darkness	16:10
9:14	Euphrates	16:12
11:15	Christ's Rule: "It is done"	16:17

From these two types of relations it seems reasonable to conclude that the seven trumpets are indeed balanced chiasmatically by the seven last plagues. This conclusion raises the question as to whether the seven seals may be balanced by chap. 18, since that chapter in the eschatological series stands chiasmatically parallel with the section in historical series that presents the seven seals (primarily in chap. 6, with the final seal in 8:1). When one examines Rev 18 in detail, however, it is evident that no other set of seven judgments is found there to balance the seven seals.

This requires the student of Revelation to examine chap. 18 from a slightly different point of view. Indeed, there are in that chapter seven units of something else that may provide the balancing elements. The identification of these units stems from the observation that Rev 18 was written predominantly in the form of poetry. The poetic nature of this chapter has been recognized by such standard translations as the RSV and the NIV. I accept this poetic character of the chapter, and employ it as the basis for further observations on the literary forms found there. However, even if one does not accept the principle that the literary units isolated below were written in poetry, their demarcations still are sufficiently clear to enable one to work with them as discrete literary units.

2. *Literary Units in Revelation 18*

While it does seem true that much of chap. 18 was written in poetry, short pieces of prose introduce each of the poetic pieces or

hymns in the chapter. These prose introductions are quite useful in delimiting the extent of each of the poems, and indicate that this chapter contains seven main hymns of judgment upon, or lament over, Babylon, the prophetic symbol employed here. These seven hymns of Rev 18 are, I believe, the elements that balance the seven seals of Rev 6. Like the seven last plagues of Rev 16, these seven hymns in Rev 18 are specifically end-time pronouncements, and thus they belong appropriately to the eschatological series of the book.

As one can see from the analysis of these hymns (treated below), there really are eight of them, instead of just seven. These eight hymns are distributed in a chiasmic literary format, however, and the two hymns at the center of that chiasm are linked together so closely that they may actually be considered as being one in nature; hence, it is correct to identify seven "main" hymns here. What we have in this type of relationship is a "7, yea 8" arrangement, reminiscent of poetically progressive enumerations found in some passages of the OT, such as Amos 1-2: "for three transgressions of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my punishment" (1:3; cf. vs. 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). It should further be noted that in Amos, this usage occurs in the context of a judgment upon a foreign power, a setting somewhat similar to that which we find in Rev 18.

The fact that some of the language of Rev 18 is related to phraseology found in judgments upon the nations in the OT, especially that of Ezekiel upon Tyre (Ezek 27-28), makes this relationship even more direct. A closer parallel to the number of units in Rev 18 appears in Eccl 11:2—"give a portion to 7, yea 8. . . ."

3. *The 7/8 Hymns in Chiasmic Pattern*

We may now proceed to an analysis of Rev 18 to see how well these 7/8 hymns fit into a chiasmic pattern. I would propose the following outline:

A. *Prose Introduction*—an angel calls with a mighty voice, vs. 2a
Hymn No. 1, vss. 2b-3

B. *Prose Introduction*—another voice from heaven, v. 4a
Hymn No. 2, vss. 4b-8

C. *Prose Introduction*—kings of the earth stand afar off and weep
 when they see the smoke of her burning, vss. 9-10a
Hymn No. 3, vs. 10b

D. *Prose Introduction*—"and the merchants of the earth weep
 and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any
 more [28 items listed]," vss. 11-13
Hymn No. 4, vs. 14

D'. *Prose Introduction*—"the merchants of these wares, who
 gained wealth from her, . . . weeping and mourning
 aloud," v. 15
Hymn No. 5, vss. 16-17a

C'. *Prose Introduction*—sailors of the sea stand afar off and cry out
 when they see the smoke of her burning, vss. 17b-19a
Hymn No. 6, vs. 19b

B'. [*Prose Introduction*—another voice, unidentified]
Hymn No. 7, vs. 20

A'. *Prose Introduction*—a mighty angel said, vs. 21a
Hymn No. 8, vss. 21b-24.

In terms of general balance throughout the entire narrative, it may be noted that the longest poems occur at opposite ends of this chiasm, nos. 1-2 at the beginning and no. 8 at the end. The reverse is true of the prose introductions. The longest of these is found at the center of the narrative, as the introduction to the first of the two laments that issue from the mouths of the merchants. The prose list given there, noting twenty-eight objects of trade, far exceeds in length any of the other prose introductions that precede the other hymns of this chapter. Thus, in terms of form by volume, this chapter may be outlined in general as, *short introductions : long poems :: long introductions : short poems :: short introduction : long poem.*

The direct relations between Hymns 4 and 5 (or D and D') at the center of this chiastic arrangement should be emphasized. The group that pronounces this lament is identified as the same in both of these instances, more so than is true for any of the other groups of paired hymns elsewhere in this chapter. The prose introduction

to Hymn 4 serves as the general introduction for Hymn 5 too, and the supplementary introduction found with the latter refers back to the introduction found with the former, by way of mentioning "these wares," i.e., the twenty-eight wares listed with the previous introduction. Another way in which these two hymns are linked directly together is through the lack of the conjunction *kai* between them at the beginning of vs. 15, when that conjunctive introduction is found at the beginning of all of the other hymns of this chapter (vss. 2, 4, 9, 11, 17b, and 21), with the exception of the distinct hymn found in vs. 20. Thus it is legitimate to identify these two short poems as two stanzas of the same song, at the center of this narrative, sung by the same group of persons. It is this direct link which provides the "7, yea 8" content by form for the poems found in this narrative, and this in turn provides the balance between 7(/8) hymns and the 7 seals of Rev 6 in the chiasmic literary structure of the book.

4. *Formal Analysis of the Literary Pattern*

Although there is no prose demarcator between the lament pronounced by the seamen in vs. 19 and the hymn which follows it in vs. 20, the content of the latter is sufficient to indicate that it should be set apart from the seamen's lament. The party pronouncing this lament may simply be taken as the "another voice" that pronounced Hymn 2 according to vs. 4, since that is the hymn that stands in chiasmic parallel with this one. Strand has already noted the comparative relations between the hymns of vs. 4-8 and vs. 20, even though he did not identify them with precisely the same poetic phraseology. That relationship is accepted here, and some support can be found for it in their respective forms. All of the other hymns of this chapter come from persons that are identified—either as angels (nos. 1 and 8), or as kings (no. 3), or as merchants (nos. 4 and 5), or as seamen (no. 6). For Hymn 2, the person from whom the voice comes is not identified; and for Hymn 7, even the voice itself is not mentioned. This contrast of Hymns 2 and 7 with the rest of the hymns in this chapter constitutes a further evidence of the link between them that Strand has already noted through another avenue of examination.

Links between the three (or four) central hymns of this chapter, which have also already been noted by Strand, can be

emphasized again here, more from the standpoint of form. The kings, merchants, and seamen all pronounce short laments. They are all introduced with the word-pair "alas, alas" (vss. 10, 16, 19) as they all pronounce woes upon Babylon in this formal way. Each one of these three hymns concludes with the statement about her judgment coming upon her in one hour. Appearing in the same position in the respective hymns, this statement constitutes as much of a link by form as it does by theme.

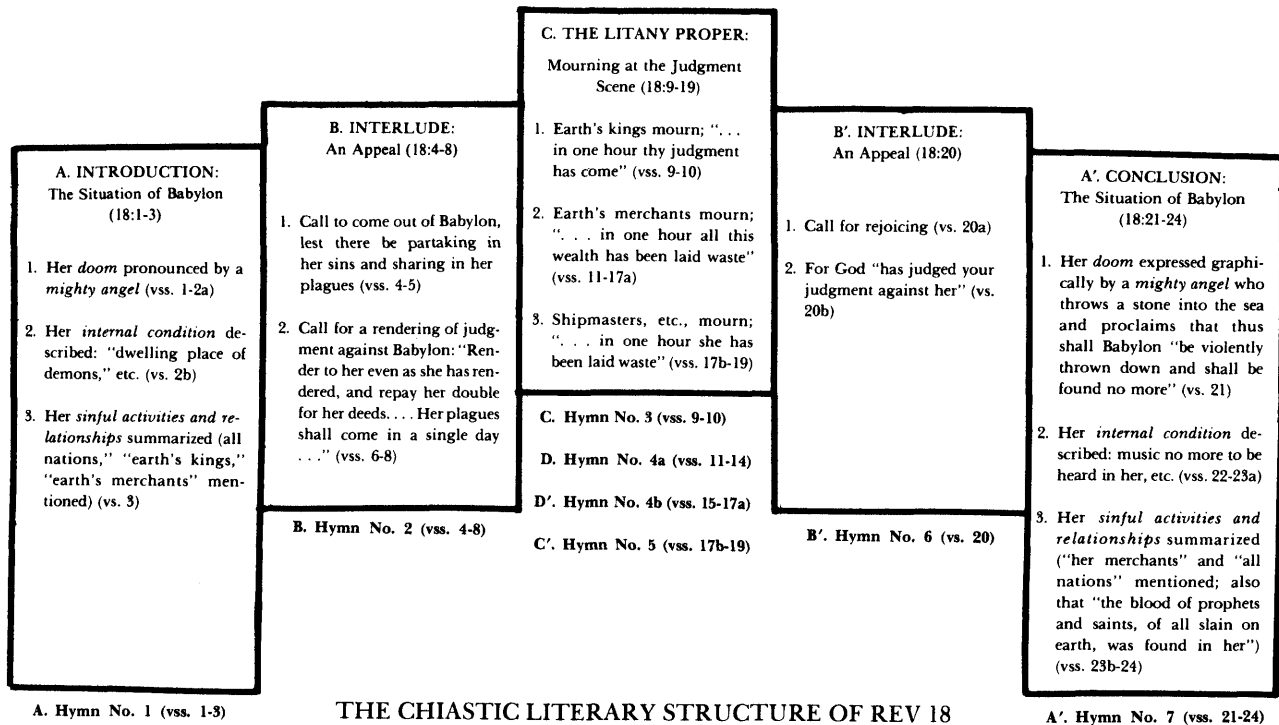
These three hymns thus compose a triad at the center of this overall chiasm, and the middle one of them—the merchants—has been divided into two subsections. The subjects who pronounce these three central laments are all plural, while the subjects pronouncing the hymns at the beginning and the end of the chapter (nos. 1, 2, [7], and 8) are all singular.

A reciprocal relationship between the first and the last of the hymns of this chapter can also be noted from a word-pair employed in their prose introductions, and from an adjective that describes their speaker. In the first hymn the angel speaks with a mighty voice, while with the latter hymn it is a mighty angel who speaks. The same adjective occurs in these two similar statements, but it has been transferred from modifying one noun to another. The word-pair of earth and sea is also involved here, since the first angel makes the earth bright while in the latter instance the angel casts a stone into the sea. The same pair of earth and sea is found closer to the center of this chiasm in that it is the kings of earth who pronounce the third lament while it is the sailors of the sea who pronounce the sixth and balancing lament. Thus the word-pair of earth and sea is balanced out among the prose introductions to four out of eight of the hymns present in this chapter.

5. *Conclusion*

We may conclude this brief study of the 7(/8) hymns of Rev 18 by noting how well their chiasm by form fits with the chiasm by theme that Strand has outlined for this passage previously. His summary outline diagram has been utilized for this purpose in the accompanying chart (on p. 256). To that reproduced diagram has been added the hymn numbers described in this study, along with their verses from Rev 18.

In conclusion, it is suggested here that the basic chiasm that Strand has outlined from his study of Rev 18 through thematic relations has found additional support from this study of that chapter from the standpoint of the literary form in which those thematic units were cast. In addition, it may also be suggested that the number of hymns identified in this way balances the seven seals within the broad chiastic literary structure of the entire book of Revelation.



(Original Diagram from K. A. Strand, "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment," *AUSS* 20 (1982):54; Hymn Structure Added by William H. Shea)