

TWO ASPECTS OF BABYLON'S JUDGMENT PORTRAYED IN REVELATION 18

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Chaps. 17 and 18 in the book of Revelation portray graphically the judgment of Babylon, a topic already introduced in 16:19-21. The present short essay will deal only with chap. 18, which contains a sort of funeral litany. In this chapter, two aspects of Babylon's judgment are set forth, a matter clarified when the literary structure of the chapter is considered.

1. *Basic Literary Structure of Rev 18*

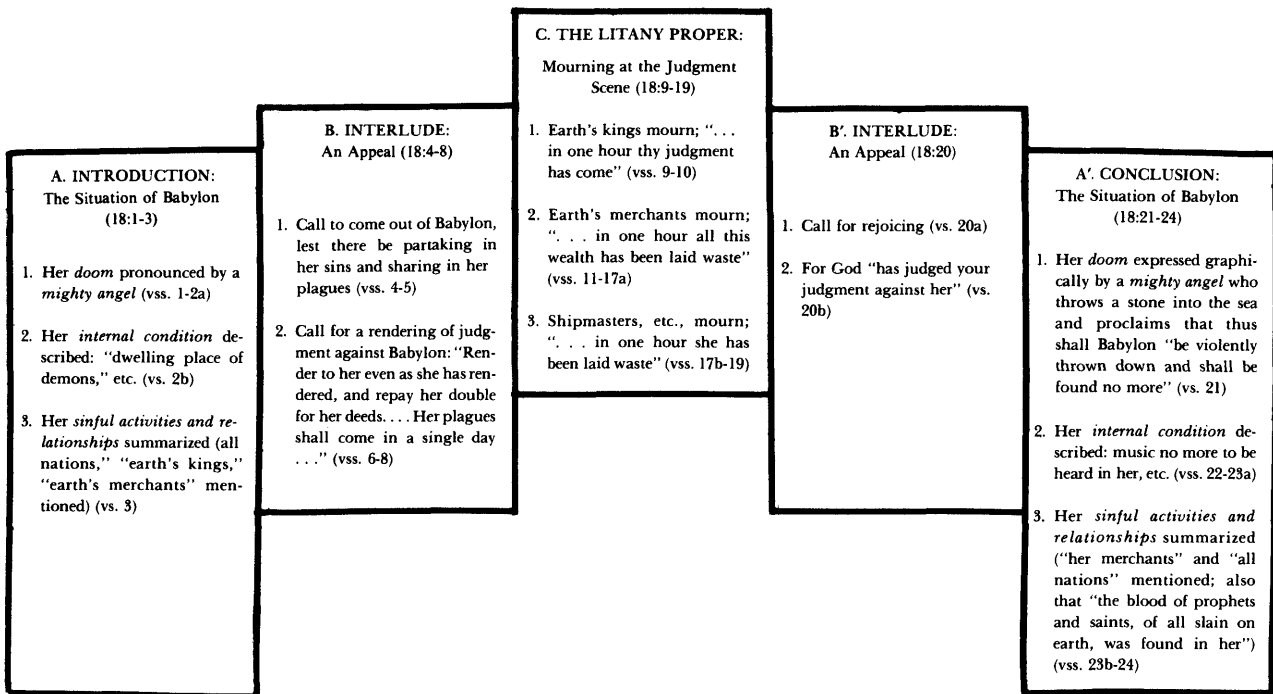
As I have noted elsewhere, the book of Revelation itself contains a basic chiastic structure.¹ It becomes a matter of interest, therefore, to notice that in chap. 18 there also is a sort of chiasm—one that actually takes the form a-b-c-b'-a'.²

The introductory and concluding sections (vss. 1-3 and 21-24, respectively) closely parallel each other, for both contain a mighty angel's announcement of the fall of Babylon (heightened in the last instance by the angel's symbolic throwing of a stone into the sea), both describe Babylon's internal condition (prior to her judgment in the first instance and subsequent to it in the last instance), and both summarize Babylon's sinful activities and relationships with "all nations" and with categories of people (such as, "the earth's kings" and "the earth's merchants").

The next parallel sections in chiastic order are interludes that have the nature of appeals—in vss. 4-8 and vs. 20, respectively. We will analyze these particular sections in somewhat more detail shortly.

¹See especially my *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Naples, Florida, 1979), pp. 43-52; and also the brief outline in "Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 401.

²This type of structure is sometimes referred to as simply ABA or as "concentric symmetry."



THE CHIASTIC LITERARY STRUCTURE OF REV 18

The central section of the chapter (vss. 9-19) may be looked upon as the litany proper. It takes the form of a lament over Babylon on the part of those who have had relationship with her—the earth's kings (vss. 9-10), the earth's merchants (vss. 11-17a), and the seafarers (vss. 17b-19). In each instance, the words of mourning conclude with an emphatic refrain to the effect that "in one hour" Babylon's judgment or desolation has come. The word "judgment" (κρίσις) used in vs. 10 is paralleled by the term "made desolate" or "laid waste" (ἠρημώθη) in vss. 17a and 19.

It is important to note that the depiction in this central section of chap. 18 is of actual *execution* of judgment, and that the Greek noun used here for "judgment" differs from that used elsewhere in the later chapters of the Apocalypse when *verdict* of judgment is in view. This is a point to which we will return later.

The accompanying outline (on the preceding page) illustrates the literary structure of chap. 18. We now turn our attention here more specifically to the two sections indicated in that outline as "interludes."

2. *The Interludes of Appeal*

Although chaps. 17 and 18 of the book of Revelation fall within the section of the Apocalypse that portrays the final judgment scenes, and therefore their visions have that consummatory judgment setting, there nevertheless are two types of material within this section that have their perspective from the pre-final-judgment era: (1) *explanatory matters* (obviously explanation would be intelligible only from the prophet's own standpoint in time), and (2) *appeals* (such would be meaningless if they pertained to a final-judgment time when they could no longer be heeded). The two interludes in chap. 18, vss. 4-8 and vs. 20, which stand in a sort of chiastic relationship to each other, as already indicated above, are therefore in an important sense *set apart from the vision proper* as set forth in the litany of the central section in vss. 9-19. These two interludes are *appeals* that relate to a time which precedes that consummatory executive judgment.³

³An example of the *explanatory* type of material occurs in chap. 17:9ff. (introduced by the phrase ὧδε ὁ ἔχων σοφίαν, "here is the mind that has wisdom"). The vision proper precedes, in the earlier part of the chapter.

The First Interlude

The first interlude is an appeal to come out of Babylon, with the added comment that “her sins have reached even to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities” (vs. 5). Then comes a statement of the verdict against her—namely, “Render to her even as she has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds . . .” (vss. 6-7). Finally, the statement is made that “therefore her plagues shall come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she shall be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her” (vs. 8).

The middle section of this interlude, which calls for rendering to Babylon “as she herself has rendered” and repaying her “double for her deeds,” reflects a justice-court verdict reached on the basis of the law of malicious witness as given in Deut 19:16-19: In the case of the malicious false witness, “both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and judges who are in office in those days” and “the judges shall inquire diligently.” If the witness was found to be a false witness, “then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.” In our setting in Rev 18, Babylon has this verdict rendered against herself—in double measure.

The Second Interlude

The counterpart interlude in vs. 20 to this first interlude of vss. 4-8 also calls attention to judgment. However, whereas the first interlude is a call to come out of Babylon in view of her condition and the verdict against her, the second is a call for rejoicing in view of that same judgment verdict rendered for God’s people against her.

The exact wording of this text deserves notice, for most English translations obscure somewhat the full or precise meaning (note, e.g., the RSV, “for God has given judgment for you against her”; or the KJV, “for God hath avenged you on her”; or the NIV, “God has judged her for the way she treated you.”) Literally the text reads, “for God has judged your judgment on her” (ὅτι ἔκρινεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ κρίμα ὑμῶν ἐξ αὐτῆς).

What is meant by God’s judging “your judgment” on her? The significance of this wording is clear, once the literary structure of the chapter is taken into account, so that it is seen that this

statement about "judgment" is a counterpart to the statement in vss. 6-7. The situation is that there has been *inquiry* or *investigation* (diligent inquiry, as expressed in Deut 19:18), and the *verdict* has been announced. The verdict is to render against Babylon the judgment that she, the malicious false witness, had rendered against God's people.

Thus, it may be said that whereas the central section of chap. 18 provides description of *execution* of judgment, the two interludes deal with *investigative* or court-inquiry judgment and its verdict. Both types of judgment are, of course, portrayed as being aspects of the fulfillment of divine justice in behalf of the Lord's true followers.

3. *Judgment Terminology: Krisis and Krima*

It is possible that an analysis of the Greek terminology translated by the English noun "judgment" in vss. 10 and 20 may further substantiate the foregoing conclusion, and to a brief analysis of the terminology we turn next.

In the later chapters of the book of Revelation, there are two Greek nouns used to describe facets of judgment—*krisis* and *krima*. These terms are also used elsewhere in the NT, of course. Whether or not, according to the lexicographers, the following analysis is applicable for the more general NT usage of the terminology,⁴ the use of the terms in the Apocalypse from chap. 15 onward seems to pattern in a specific way. As the plagues are poured out (in *execution* of judgment) in chap. 16, for instance, the *krisis* type of judgment is mentioned in vs. 7 in the statement, "O Lord God, omnipotent, true and righteous are your judgments." In the *execution* of judgment as portrayed in the central litany of chap. 18

⁴I am not certain, however, but that general NT usage of the terms has frequently been misunderstood because of nuances we may fail to grasp. There may be some relevance or relatedness in the fact that the -σις ending denotes *action* and the -μα ending indicates the *result* of an action. See Bruce M. Metzger, *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek*, new ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1975), pp. 42, 43. Of course, as Metzger notes, "roots, stems, and suffixes never existed as independent words in Greek. . . . The analysis of words into their component morphological elements is merely a scientific device useful for purposes of arrangement and classification" (*ibid.*, p. 42, n. 2).

that we have noted above, it is again the *krisis* type of judgment that is brought to view—in vs. 10, “in one hour thy [Babylon’s] judgment has come.” As indicated earlier, the word “judgment” in this verse is paralleled by the term “laid waste” (ἠρημώθη) in the two paralleling emphatic refrains in vss. 17a and 19.

The point of main interest here is that in the two interludes we have noted in chap. 18, where judgment is brought to view, the one occurrence that we have of the term “judgment” in the substantive (in vs. 20) is *krima*, not *krisis*. (In the earlier interlude, only a verbal form occurs, and this form is non-determinative for our purposes.)

Is the choice of the word *krima* in vs. 20, in contrast to the word *krisis* in vs. 10, significant? I would suggest that it is indeed so, and especially in view of the fact that vs. 20 is a counterpart to the investigative type of judgment of vss. 6-7. Moreover, it becomes a matter of further interest to note that in chap. 19, where the literary structure of the book of Revelation has moved us onward to a further praise scene—one that embraces the totality of what has been described in chaps. 17 and 18, including the execution phase of judgment—*krisis* is again brought to view (19:2).

4. Conclusion

The literary structure of Rev 18 puts into dramatic relief two aspects of judgment: (1) the execution of judgment on Babylon, as portrayed in the central litany of vss. 9-19, and (2) an investigative-type judgment whose verdict, in harmony with the law of malicious witness, places on the false witness Babylon the judgment which Babylon has unjustly rendered against God’s people. The reflection of the law of malicious witness is very clear in the first interlude where the statement is made, “Render to her even as she has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds” (vs. 6). It is also clear in the second interlude, in vs. 20, when the last statement in that verse is understood in its literal rendering (“for God has judged your judgment on her”) and when recognition is given to the fact that vs. 20 forms a paralleling counterpart to vss. 6-7.

Further support for the foregoing conclusion regarding two aspects of judgment in Rev 18 is possibly forthcoming from a study of the Greek nouns translated “judgment” in the latter part of the book of Revelation: *krisis*, used in vs. 10 to describe the execution of

judgment taking place; and *krima*, used in vs. 20 as the literarily paralleling counterpart to the court-inquiry, verdict-rendering type of judgment dealt with in vss. 6-7.

EXCURSUS

Commentaries and other treatments of the book of Revelation generally fall far short in bringing to light the true theological dimensions of the judgment motif in chap. 18, being content rather to identify sources for the imagery and/or to make simple comments. Seldom noticed, for example, are such basic features or concerns as the literary structure of the passage and the significance of the law of malicious witness. It is the purpose here to call attention briefly to two works that in certain ways overcome this deficiency in their treatment of Rev 18—Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington, D.C., 1968), and G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York, 1966).

Minear has given considerable attention to literary features of the various sections of the book of Revelation, providing the biblical text itself in a form that highlights his understanding of those features. (He gives the biblical text interspersed with commentary on pp. 3-197, and he gives it again later in a consecutive, uninterrupted order on pp. 300-365.) Although his presentation of the text of chap. 18 does not reveal a fivefold division of that chapter, a paragraph in his discussion on p. 145 seems to do so and comes fairly close to matching my own analysis. This paragraph is worth quoting in full:

18:1-24. The fall of Babylon, announced on earlier occasions, is celebrated with appropriate language and lament. Reading the chapter consecutively but omitting vss. 4-8 and vs. 20, we note that the funeral litany begins and ends with angels who exercise great power. In both cases the prophet utilizes a dirge-like rhythm, in vss. 2, 3 stressing by six lines of synonymous parallelism the accusations against the city, and in vss. 21-24 describing her desolation in terms of five parallel couplets followed by the repetition of the basic charges which justified her destruction. Between are the poignant laments and curses of those groups who have been polluted by the city's adulteries: the kings of the earth (the lament comes in vs. 10, but is based on vs. 3), the merchants of the earth (the laments are in vs. 14, 16, anticipated in vs. 3 and echoed in vs. 23), the sea-going traders (vs. 19). Set over against these laments, this funeral litany, are two messages addressed especially to God's people. The first calls for them to break loose from their attachment to the city and justifies the vengeance which is her lot (vs. 4-8); the second is a hymn of rejoicing which, coming

after the last lament, stands in very sharp contrast to it. The form of both the dirges and the hymns of joy are shaped after Old Testament models and saturated with typical prophetic irony and savage humor. At important points the portrait of the city is painted in colors opposite to those of the new Jerusalem (Ch. 21, 22).

Miner has, however, evidently missed the real significance of the parallelism between vss. 4-8 and vs. 20 and has also apparently failed to recognize the background of the law of malicious witness, for he translates vs. 20b as "from her [Babylon] God had claimed justice for you" (pp. 141, 351).

Caird has seen less of the basic literary structure than Miner, subdividing the material as follows: 18:1-8, "The Lament of Heaven"; 18:9-19, "The Lament of the Earth"; and 18:20-19:4, "The Judgment of Babylon" (pp. 221, 224, 227). On the other hand, in connection with 18:20b, Caird has suggested as background both the law of malicious witness of Deut 19:16-19 and the "law of bloodshed" given in Gen 9:5-6 (pp. 229-230). Strangely, he has failed to notice the law of malicious witness in connection with vss. 6-7, making reference there only to the *lex talionis*—as "a consistent belief" running through John's theology (p. 224). Nevertheless, concerning vs. 20b, Caird's translation is noteworthy (in contrast to most translations that are given): "God has imposed on her [Babylon] the sentence she passed on you" (p. 230). So also are his immediately following comments: "Babylon has brought a malicious accusation against the martyrs, which has resulted in their death. But the case has been carried 'before the Lord,' to the court of final appeal, where judgments are true and just. There Babylon has been found guilty of perjury, and God has therefore required from her the life of her victims, exacting from her the penalty she exacted from them" (ibid.).