

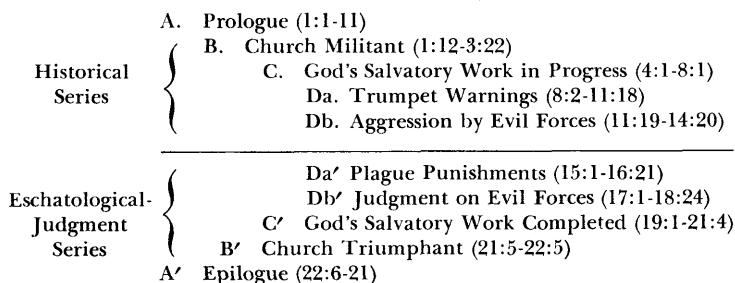
# CHIASTIC STRUCTURE AND SOME MOTIFS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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The present brief discussion takes note of two types of literary analysis of the book of Revelation which have appeared in recent literature, and it deals with those types in relationship to a broad chiastic pattern for the Revelation that I have elaborated in earlier publications.<sup>1</sup> The two types are (1) analysis which discovers a major division of the book at the turn between chaps. 11 and 12, and (2) the concentric-symmetry model (the A-B-A' pattern).

My chiastic-structure analysis finds the main division of the book at the turn between chaps. 14 and 15. This dividing point derives from a consideration of common themes that are counterparts in an historical setting (in the first main part of the book up through chap. 14) and an eschatological-judgment setting (chap. 15 onward). Although the reader must be referred elsewhere<sup>2</sup> for details concerning this structure, a very brief description will be provided in the concluding section of this article. Also, it will be useful here to indicate the pattern by means of a diagram that can serve as a point of reference for the discussion that follows:

Diagram 1. Chiastic Structure  
in the Book of Revelation



<sup>1</sup> See esp. my *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Worthington, Ohio, 1976), pp. 43-52 (published earlier in *The Open Gates of Heaven* [Ann Arbor, Mich., 1970], pp. 41-48).

<sup>2</sup> See n. 1, above.

### 1. *The Concept of a Major Dividing Point at the Turn Between Chaps. 11 and 12*

The concept of a major dividing point in the book of Revelation at the turn between chaps. 11 and 12 has been set forth recently by J. Massyngberde Ford within the framework of a compilation theory that assumes chaps. 4-11 to represent a revelation to John the Baptist and chaps. 12-22 as deriving from a disciple of John the Baptist and written probably "between A.D. 60 and 70."<sup>3</sup> Other scholars maintaining this sort of division of the book have not necessarily revived the old compilation theory, however, and have set forth an internal literary pattern as substantiation for the dividing point. Paul S. Minear, in indicating that many exegetes "treat all the material from Ch. 12 to the end of the book as a single unit," states further:

They observe that in chapters 12 and 13 are identified, in descending order, the line of command in Satan's army: first the commander-in-chief, then the sea-beast, the earth-beast or false prophet, Babylon, and finally, all the beast-worshippers. The series of pictures showing their defeat, however, is given in reverse order. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Apparently Minear himself adopts this major dividing point (moved ahead one verse, so as to include 11:19 with the second division), but for practical purposes of analysis he subdivides the material into smaller units or "arches."<sup>5</sup> H. B. Swete, E. B. Allo, and André Feuillet are among other scholars who find a major dividing point in the Revelation at the turn between chaps. 11 and 12.<sup>6</sup>

It should immediately be noted that whatever division the text may have at 11:19 or 12:1 because of the introduction of the *dramatis personae* of Satan's army, a more fundamental dividing point regarding these entities occurs at the end of chap. 14. Actually, the sequence in descending order reaches to that point. Then, from chap. 15 onward the sequence is repeated in reverse order. The situation is sketched in Diagram 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Revelation*, AB 38 (1975): 50-54.

<sup>4</sup> *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington, D.C., 1968), p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (New York, 1906); E. B. Allo, *St. Jean, l'Apocalypse*, 3d ed. (Paris, 1933); André Feuillet, *L'Apocalypse. État de la question* (Paris, 1963), pp. 29-30.

Diagram 2. The Evil Hierarchy Introduced and Judged\*  
(only the first verse of multi-verse references is given)

- A. Dragon (12:3)  
 B. Sea-Beast (13:1)\*\*  
 C. Earth-Beast = False Prophet (13:11)\*\*
- 
- D. Babylon (14:8)  
 E. Beast-Worshippers (14:9)
- 
- E' Beast-Worshippers (16:2)  
 D' Babylon (16:19)
- 
- C' Earth-Beast = False Prophet (19:20)\*\*  
 B' Sea-Beast (19:20)\*\*  
 A' Dragon (20:2)

Notes to Diagram 2:

\* It must be recognized that the sequences are at the level of formal literary portrayal and do not necessarily represent either any lock-step chronology or entities that are entirely discrete or independent. In the first sequence, the text makes clear the overlap in activities among the *personae*; and the judgmental scenes appear to be somewhat recapitulatory in nature too (cf., e.g., 17:8 with 20:7-10). Also, in harmony with the method of symbolic usage in the Revelation, it seems likely that in a sense the motif of a duo of Babylon and beast-worshippers recapitulates the motif of the anti-divine trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet. Dotted lines have been inserted in the diagram to suggest this possibility.

\*\* The sea-beast and earth-beast (false prophet) work so closely together that they might be considered a unit. I have separated them because they are introduced separately in chap. 13; but in 19:20 they are treated together (they are taken together and thrown into the lake of fire together).

A further significant consideration in the matter is the fact that the evil hierarchy, when first introduced, appears as part of a broader section up to 14:20. That broader section, 8:2-14:20, is a large doublet that embraces both the trumpets septet and the afore-mentioned *dramatis personae*; but in another sense it is also a unit in presenting an "Egypt-Babylon" motif. Moreover, it is paralleled chiasmically by a similar large doublet in 15:1-18:24 that also carries the unifying "Egypt-Babylon" motif. In the first doublet, the trumpets that are reminiscent of the plagues on ancient Egypt merge into and give way to a Babylon theme, the crucial transitional element being the introduction of the "great river Euphrates" under the sixth trumpet in 9:14. In similar fashion, the bowls of wrath, once more reminiscent of the plagues on ancient Egypt, merge into and give way to a Babylon motif,

the crucial transitional element again being the introduction of the "great river Euphrates"—under the sixth bowl in 16:12.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to notice that the introduction of the evil hierarchy in chaps. 12-14 appears as an integral subsection within the first exposition of this Egypt-Babylon theme. Then the sequence of defeat to the members of the hierarchy begins as the Egypt-Babylon motif is utilized the second time—in the broad judgmental doublet of the bowls of wrath and of the judgment on the harlot and the beast.<sup>8</sup> It is evident that on the basis of the double set of references to both (1) the *dramatis personae* of the hierarchy of evil and (2) the Egypt-Babylon motif, the major dividing point in the book of Revelation is at the turn between chaps. 14 and 15, rather than at the turn between chaps. 11 and 12.

## 2. *The Concentric-Symmetry Model*

The recent work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on composition and structure in the book of Revelation is indeed insightful and thought-provoking.<sup>9</sup> Fiorenza brings to bear on the subject a variety of pertinent considerations, alludes to several types of structural elements which she feels are evident in the literary pattern of the book, and in the latter connection makes use of the actantial model. The present brief discussion can focus on only one aspect of her illuminating treatment—her utilization of the concentric-symmetry pattern.

<sup>7</sup>In the bowls septet, however, the immediate introduction of Babylon is more transparent than in the trumpets septet. This is by virtue of the mention of the very name "Babylon" under the seventh bowl, shortly after the introduction of the "great river Euphrates." Specific mention of the name Babylon is omitted in the trumpet sequence at the similar place, and is in fact delayed until 14:8. Was this omission intentional so as to have the name "*Babylon*" introduced *only after* the prior formal introduction of the triad of dragon and two beasts, thus maintaining at the formal literary level a chiasmic structure relating to the *dramatis personae* of Satan's army? Such an assumption is supported by a consideration also of the fact that in the blending of several images in Rev 11:8, "the great city" (elsewhere called "Babylon"; cf. 14:8, 16:19, 18:2, and 18:21) is not so designated here but is rather referred to as the city "which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified."

<sup>8</sup>It extends beyond this section, of course; but this fact does not affect the dividing point at the turn between chaps. 14 and 15.

<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Composition and Structure in the Book of Revelation," *CBQ* 39 (1977): 344-366.

As Fiorenza has pointed out, this pattern has background counterparts in Greek drama, in Roman narrative poetry, and in Roman art; but antecedents are not lacking in Hebrew literature.<sup>10</sup> The possibility of this type of pattern in the book of Revelation should not be dismissed, and can be set alongside the chiasmic one that I have suggested.

In applying the pattern, Fiorenza considers Rev 10:1-15:4 as forming the centerpiece in the concentric structure. My own outline, as sketched above, in Diagram 1, could also rather easily be revised into a concentric-symmetry one; but in this case I would find the centerpiece at 15:2-4, the Song of Moses and the Lamb.

Diagram 3 indicates both the pattern given by Fiorenza and the one that I would propose as a possible variation to a strictly chiasmic pattern.

Diagram 3. Possible Alternatives for a Concentric-Symmetry Pattern in the Book of Revelation

FIORENZA'S CONCENTRIC-SYMMETRY SUGGESTION (see Fiorenza, p. 364)	CONCENTRIC-SYMMETRY ALTERNATIVE TO STRAND'S OUTLINE OF CHIASMIC STRUCTURE IN DIAGRAM 1
A. 1:1-8	A. 1:1-11
B. 1:9-3:22	B. 1:12-3:22
C. 4:1-9:21; 11:15-19	C. 4:1-8:1
D. 10:1-15:4	Da. 8:2-11:18
C' 15:1, 5-19:10	Db. 11:19-14:20
B' 19:11-22:9	E. 15:2-4 (Song of Moses and the Lamb)
A' 22:10-22:21	Da' 15:1, 5-16:21
	Db' 17:1-18:24
	C' 19:1-21:4
	B' 21:5-22:5
	A' 22:6-21

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 365-366. For examples from Hebrew background, she refers to the work of R. Pesch on Jonah and to that of A. Vanhoye regarding the NT Epistle to the Hebrews. It may be added that the ancient Near East yields further pertinent examples. See, e.g., the brief but interesting discussion of Cyrus Gordon, *Introduction to Old Testament Times* (Ventnor, N.J., 1953), pp. 72-73, where mention is made of an "ABA" pattern in the Code of Hammurabi and the Book of Job (prose prologue and epilogue, with center section in poetry) and in the book of Daniel (beginning and end in Hebrew with center section in Aramaic). On a basis of content, Dan 9 reflects also somewhat of a concentric-symmetry pattern, a matter which will be dealt with by Jacques Doukhan in a forthcoming article in *AUSS*.

Fiorenza has correctly recognized that the material in the Revelation is theologically-thematically conceived and that the book gives evidence of "unitary composition."<sup>11</sup> Her basis, however, for concluding that 10:1-15:4 is the center of the book by being "the prophetic interpretation of the political and religious situation of the community"<sup>12</sup> is not clear. If indeed this particular aspect of the book's message could be determined to lie at the center (and by what criteria is such to be determined?), how can we arrive at the next conclusion—that 10:1-15:4 provides the basic portrayal indicated? Are not, e.g., the messages to the seven churches a more clear and more explicit "prophetic interpretation of the political and religious situation of the community"? And in any event, why limit the section itself to 10:1-15:4, when on literary grounds there is an Egypt-Babylon unit which embraces this section (at least to 14:20) but which actually *begins earlier*, at 8:2? (See my discussion on pp. 403-404.)

The theological-thematic basis for the chiasmic pattern that I have outlined in Diagram 1 has already surfaced somewhat in my discussion above and will be substantiated further in the concluding section of this article. The arguments for it would also serve to substantiate the concentric-symmetry variation I have presented in Diagram 3. However, at present I must still favor the chiasmic pattern over the concentric-symmetry one, inasmuch as 15:2-4 fits the former pattern better than the latter. The angels with the bowls are introduced in 15:1 *before* the Song of Moses and the Lamb, thus tying this song to the bowls septet. There appears to be no textual basis for altering the arrangement; and in fact, the placing of vss. 1 and 5 in immediate sequence yields a somewhat clumsy reading, which is not the case if the text is allowed to remain as it presently stands. Also, the fact should be noted that this literary structure of a "victorious vision" after the first mention of angels with the bowls is parallel to that in chap. 8, where a similar type of "interruption" comes in vss. 2-5, following the first mention of angels with the trumpets. The similarity of literary pattern in these parallel presentations suggests that the Song of Moses and the Lamb has the same

<sup>11</sup> Fiorenza, p. 350.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

relationship to the bowls vision as the temple scene in 8:2-5 has to the trumpets vision.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. *Conclusion: The Theological-Thematic Arrangement of the Apocalypse*

My basic division of the Revelation into two major parts at the turn between chaps. 14 and 15 is built on a literary analysis of thematic counterparts, supported by consideration of the two-fold theme of the book itself as enunciated in both the prologue and epilogue.

As for the counterparts, the section on the 7 Churches relates to the New Jerusalem-New Earth section as "promise and fulfillment," with promises to the overcomer in the first section finding their eschatological-reward counterpart in the second section (there are also a number of other thematic parallels).<sup>14</sup> The Throne-Room/7-Seals section in 4:1-8:1 has numerous parallels with the section from 19:1-21:4 (these include the basic setting of the throne, 24 elders, 4 living creatures, and anthems of praise; references to God's "judging and avenging" the blood of the martyrs; depiction of a conquering rider on a white horse and of the scenes with earth's kings, great men, etc., in distress or disaster; mention of white clothing, and of the wiping away of tears; etc.). Finally, the double section of trumpets and dragon-plus-beasts in 8:2-14:20 finds clear and obvious counterparts in the double section on plagues and beast/Babylon in 15:1-18:24. (The underlying unity in each of these "double sections" has been noted above as being connected with the Egypt-Babylon motif.)

The sections of the book up to the end of chap. 14, it should be observed, deal with conditions in historical setting—the church still defective and in need of warning, an outcry of how long until God will judge and avenge the martyrs, trumpet warnings, and evil powers in aggression against Christ and his followers (each sequence, however, *leading up to* the time of eschatological judgment). The sections from chap. 15 onward deal with con-

<sup>13</sup> See my *Interpreting*, p. 48, for an outline of a recurring literary pattern that includes a "victorious vision."

<sup>14</sup> For information on these and other counterparts to be mentioned below, see my *Interpreting*, pp. 45-47.

ditions in an eschatological-judgment setting—the church rewarded, the acclamation that God has judged and avenged the martyrs, plague punishments on beast-worshippers, and the evil powers judged by God (with only the explanatory and appeal items in these sections having reference to the “historical era”).

This twofold division bears what I consider an intentional relationship to the twice-enunciated twofold theme of the book of Revelation: Christ’s return and the presence of the Alpha and Omega (1:7-8; 22:12-13). The references to Christ’s coming to give rewards look ahead to eschatological judgment, and thus find their basic exposition in the second major division of the book. The Alpha-Omega references give assurance of the divine presence even in an historical age which treats Christ’s followers ill, and thus these references relate primarily to the lines of thought developed in the first major division of the book.