

SOME MODALITIES OF SYMBOLIC USAGE IN REVELATION 18

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The book of Revelation is by far the richest Bible book in allusions to other parts of Scripture, especially the OT.¹ It undoubtedly is also the richest with respect to modalities in which the allusions occur. Aside from the broad concepts of "fluidity" in symbolic portrayal, "rebirth" of images, and "blending" or "merging" of symbolic backgrounds,² there are other important facets of

¹Various commentators have noted this fact. See, e.g., H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3d ed. (London, Eng., 1909; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1951), pp. cxl-clviii, where an extensive listing of comparisons between Revelation and the OT is provided (affecting 248 of Revelation's 404 verses); and Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957), pp. 26-27, 101-116, and especially the table on p. 104. It should be noted that Swete's textual comparisons are based on the listing of Westcott and Hort in their Greek NT, and that Tenney, although making reference to Swete on p. 101, has provided a different sort of tabulation in his table on p. 104. Most listings number the allusions at fewer than 500, although J. Massyngberde Ford in the Anchor Bible volume on *Revelation* (vol. 38, 1975), refers to A. Vanhoye as having computed the number as 518. Actually, however, Albert Vanhoye, "L'utilisation du livre d'Ézéchiél dans l'Apocalypse," *Bib* 43 (1962), p. 439, refers to the statistics offered by several investigators, and he attributes the statistic of 518 allusions (plus other figures mentioned by Ford, such as 88 allusions to Daniel) to A. Gelin, *L'Apocalypse*, in *Bible Pirot* (Paris, 1938), pp. 589-590. Presently work is being done by my colleague Jon Paulien that may reveal the numbers of allusions thus far suggested by the investigators as being far too low; a count of upward of a thousand may prove to be more reasonable. (Incidentally, the term "allusions" is used herein in a broad sense that includes both "quotations" and "allusions" as defined by Tenney, p. 103. There are no "citations" in the Apocalypse.)

²"Fluidity" in symbolic portrayal has received brief discussion in K. A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Naples, Fla., 1979), p. 28; "rebirth" of images is a term used by Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (Oxford, Eng., 1964; and Gloucester, Mass., 1970); and the "blending" or "merging" of images is described in K. A. Strand, "An Overlooked Background to Revelation 11:1," *AUSS* 22 (1984): 317-319, where I relate this kind of symbolic portrayal to what Paul S. Minear has termed a "trans-historical model"

the Apocalypse's use of symbolic representation that deserve notice. Two such further modalities that are represented in Rev 18 are the focus of the present brief article: (1) *dramatic inversion* (or *reversal*) of images, and (2) *literal transmission* of OT expression and/or conceptualization into the new literary medium and setting. The former will be illustrated from vs. 6 and the latter from vs. 20.

1. *The Literary Structure of Revelation 18*

The portrayal of Babylon's judgment in Rev 18 takes the literary form of a well-balanced chiasm, a subject treated in two earlier *AUSS* articles.³ The blocs of material can be outlined as follows (a more-detailed diagram appears at the close of this article):

- A. Introduction (Babylon's Doom Pronounced; Her Internal Condition Described; Her Sinful Activities and Relationships Summarized), vss. 1-3
- B. "Interlude" (Appeal to "Come Out of Babylon"; Statement of Judgment on Babylon), vss. 4-8
- C. The Litany Proper (Mourning of Kings, Merchants, and Seafarers at Babylon in Flames), vss. 9-19
- B'. "Interlude" (Call for Rejoicing; Statement of Judgment on Babylon), vs. 20
- A'. Conclusion (Babylon's Doom Graphically Expressed; Her Internal Condition Described; Her Sinful Activities and Relationships Summarized), vss. 21-24

Of particular interest to us here are two closely corresponding statements in the two "interludes"—namely, the two specific references to the divine judicial verdict against Babylon. These are as follows:

Vs. 6: "Render to her [Babylon] as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed." (RSV)

and as "a comprehensive rather than a disjunctive mode of seeing and thinking" (see my n. 6 on p. 319, and Minear, "Ontology and Ecclesiology in the Apocalypse," *NTS* 12 [1965/66]: 96).

³K. A. Strand, "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment Portrayed in Revelation 18," and W. H. Shea, "Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18," in *AUSS* 20 (1982): 53-60 and 249-256, respectively.

Vs. 20: "For God has judged your judgment against her." (A fairly literal rendition; see section 3 of this article)

The foregoing declarations are patterned after the law of malicious witness. According to that law, as stated in Deut 19:18-19, the judges were to make diligent investigation of the case; and, upon discovery that false testimony had been brought against an individual, judgment was to be rendered to the effect that the accuser would be treated "as he had intended to do to his brother." A concrete illustration of the same judicial concept from ancient Persia occurs in the book of Esther, in Haman's being hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (Esth 7:9-10). Also, the principle of making the penalty commensurate with the crime, as reflected in the *lex talionis* ("eye-for-eye," etc.; cf. Deut 19:21, Exod 21:23-25, et al.), appears to be background for these statements in Rev 18.

2. *The "Dramatic-Inversion" Modality*

The first declaration in the judgment-decree statement of Rev 18:6—"Render to her [Babylon] as she herself has rendered"—is totally comprehensible as being within the scope and intent of the law of malicious witness. It also comes squarely within the penalty parameters designated in the *lex talionis*: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (*not* "two eyes for one eye, two teeth for one tooth," etc.).⁴ The curious part of the decree of Rev 18:6 is the second declaration: "and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed."

It may be that this *heightened form* of the declaration is a poetic device incorporated for emphasis. However, even if this be the case, a point of interest to us here is that the declaration appears to be related to a series of OT passages that pertain to the experience of the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah in connection with the

⁴George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1955; reprinted from *BA* 17 [1954]: 26-46, 49-76), has dealt with certain basic concepts and structures relating to ancient Israelite law and covenant, especially in the setting of broader concepts and structures of law and covenant in the ancient Near East. Regarding the *lex taliones*, he has made the observation that this law was "originally a measure of protection. It contrasted originally to the Song of Lamech (Gen. 4:23-24), and is simply the classical legal policy that legal responsibility is limited to the extent of injury done" (pp. 16-17).

Babylonian captivity and subsequent restoration. These passages are as follows (given here in RSV translation):

Isa 40:2—"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Isa 61:7—"Instead of your shame, you shall have a double portion; . . . therefore in your land you shall possess a double portion. . . ."

Jer 16:18—"And I will doubly recompense their iniquity and sin [i.e., "iniquity and sin" in Judah; cf. vs. 10-17], because they have polluted my land. . . ."

Jer 17:18—"Let those [people in Judah] be put to shame who persecute me [Jeremiah]; . . . destroy them with double destruction."

Zech 9:12—"Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare to you that I will restore to you double."

The striking point to notice here is that although there are OT references that thus refer to a doubling of Judah's punishment (and also a double measure in her restoration), such language is *not used with regard to ancient Babylon*, the prototype for the apocalyptic Babylon of Revelation. In fact, one of the most prominent and basic of the OT backgrounds for the "fall-of-Babylon" material in Rev 17-18—namely, the "fall-of-Babylon" prophecy of Jer 50-51⁵—contains multiple references to the divine verdict against ancient Babylon; but in every case, her punishment is decreed to be equivalent to (not a doubling of) what her offenses have been: She is to be rewarded "according to her deeds" (Jer 50:29; see also 50:15 and 51:6, 10, 11, 24, 49, 56). Moreover, it should not be overlooked in this connection that the two strongest declarations concerning "double" punishment for the people of Judah (Jer 16:18 and 17:18)

⁵Note may be taken, e.g., of the following: "The "golden-cup" imagery (Jer 51:7 and Rev 17:4), nations drinking of Babylon's "wine" (Jer 51:7 and Rev 18:3), Babylon's *sudden fall* (Jer 51:8 and Rev 18:2, 8, 10, 17, 19), the "flee-from-Babylon" appeal (Jer 51:6 and Rev 18:4), Babylon's destruction by *fire* (Jer 51:30-32, 58 and Rev 18:9, 18), the stone-hurled-into-water symbolism (Jer 51:63-64 [into "the Euphrates," to rise no more] and Rev 18:21 [into "the sea," to be found no more]), etc.

come from this very same prophet, Jeremiah, who repeatedly refers to only equivalency in punishment for Babylon.

What we appear to have in Rev 18:6b-c, then, is an interesting reversal-of-roles type of allusion wherein it is now Babylon, not Judah, that is to receive a double measure of punishment. This symbolic portrayal is an example of what may well be called the "dramatic-inversion" modality. (It is to be remembered, too, of course, that Rev 18:6a represents a direct allusion to Babylon's judgment as pronounced in Jer 50-51; thus Rev 18:6 in fact includes two distinct kinds of allusion, with two different ancient political entities furnishing the backgrounds.)

Though it is beyond the scope of this brief study to probe in depth the possible reasons for Revelation's use of this modality in connection with the judgment-on-Babylon portrayal, a brief comment or two may be made in passing. First of all, there may be a subtle suggestion that the "new" Babylon's outrages parallel those of ancient Judah, for which Judah at that time received double punishment. Certainly, this new Babylon is an entity of unparalleled profligation and cruelty, of which the account in Rev 17-18 gives ample evidence (cf. 17:2-4, 6; 18:2-5, 7, 24).

In the second place, there may also be, in this same connection, an implication that this new Babylon, in her self-centered pride, haughtiness, and atrocities against Christ's loyal followers, was sinning against greater light than had been the case with her ancient counterpart. In her blasphemies, in her making the nations mad with intoxication, and in her shedding the innocent blood of God's saints, she had a greater degree of awareness of what she was *really* doing than did ancient Babylon in attacking Judah and Jerusalem of old. This greater awareness was, consequently, more akin to the divine enlightenment and God-given privileges of ancient Judah that led to "double" punishment for Judah when she repudiated those benefits.⁶

⁶In other words, greater privileges bring greater responsibilities—whether this be for God's own people or for the "new" Babylon of the Apocalypse. The principle is repeatedly set forth in Scripture. One may note, e.g., Amos's doom prophecies ("for three transgressions . . . even for four" [1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; and 2:1, 4, 6]) wherein Israel's privileged status and *corresponding responsibility* are dramatically set forth in 3:1-2. Compare also Jesus' woe pronouncement upon Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt 11:21-24), and the statement that from the one "to whom much is given much will be required," etc. (Luke 12:48).

In a somewhat different vein, it is interesting to note, further, that Rev 18:6 may not furnish the sole example of “dramatic-inversion” allusion within the book. Very possibly there is another instance of it in Rev 11:13. Here, in conjunction with reference to the great earthquake that destroyed “a tenth of the city,” it is further stated that seven thousand people were killed and that “the rest feared and gave glory to the God of heaven.” G. B. Caird has suggested that these “seven thousand” slain in the earthquake of 11:13 constitute a symbolic counterpart to the faithful “seven thousand” who had “not bowed the knee to Baal” at the time of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:18).⁷ Caird’s interpretation in this respect is strengthened, of course, by the fact that “Elijah” and “Jezebel” imagery is basic in Revelation’s symbolic portrayal—with Elijah imagery, for that matter, occurring earlier in this very same pericope (see 11:6: the two witnesses have power to “close the sky, so that no rain may fall”).⁸ If indeed Caird’s interpretation is correct (as I feel that it is), we have here another example of Revelation’s use of the “dramatic-inversion” modality.

Finally, as we conclude this section of our study, it may be well to point out that this dramatic-inversion modality in alluding to OT materials serves to heighten the already-pervasive contrasts within Revelation itself. This internal “dramatic inversion” occurs, for instance, in such cases as the beast-worshipers receiving blood

⁷G. B. Caird, *Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York, 1966), pp. 165-168. Caird further suggests, contrary to virtually every other commentator, that the last part of vs. 13 depicts *true repentance* on the part of the survivors of the earthquake, and that it thus stands in contrast both to Rev 9:20-21 (where *unrepentant* persons are described) and to the foregoing clause in 11:13 itself. He points out that the *same* basic Greek terms for “fear” and “give glory” occur also in Rev 14:6-7, where it is clear that a *genuine* religious experience is meant. (English translations hardly do justice to the Greek *ἐμφοβοὶ ἐγένοντο* in 11:13 by such renditions as “became terrified” [RSV], “were terrified” [TEV and NIV], or “were afraid” [New KJV]; and even the word “fear” has, of course, negative connotations in English. The term “God-fearers” helps us get closer to the real meaning, also inherent in the expression “fear of the Lord.” Caird himself renders the clause in 11:13 as “paid homage.”)

⁸“Jezebel” of 2:20-23 parallels, of course, the harlot “Babylon” of Revelation; and as has now been shown by W. H. Shea, “The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16:16,” *AUSS* 18 (1980): 158-162, the “Armageddon” symbol in Rev 16:16 stems from Elijah’s victory on Mt. Carmel over the false prophets of Jezebel (see 1 Kgs 18:19-40).

to drink for having shed the blood of God's servants (16:4-6), torment and mourning to be given to Babylon in proportion to her self-glorification and luxurious living (18:7), the homage eventually given to the Philadelphian Christians by their erstwhile accusers (3:9), the proud "new" Babylon in flames in contrast to God's eternal new Jerusalem in glory (chaps. 18 and 21-22), and many others.⁹

3. *The "Literal-Transmission" Modality*

NT scholars have long been aware of the unusual Greek style in which the Apocalypse is written—a style characterized, among other things, by its "solecisms" and "semitisms."¹⁰ In recent years there has been an increasing awareness that this phenomenon may represent a *purposeful* or *intentional* procedure, rather than giving evidence of the writer's ineptness in the use of the Greek language.¹¹ I would, in fact, go so far as to consider it a "modality" of linguistic and symbolic usage in the Apocalypse—what might be called the modality of "literal transmission."

In my earlier study on this 18th chapter of Revelation I pointed out that Bible translations generally fail to do full justice to the last part of vs. 20.¹² When one recognizes that there is a chiasmic parallel of vs. 20 with vs. 6 and that the law of malicious witness forms the conceptual and foundational literary background in both of these

⁹An excellent list of nearly two dozen of the striking contrasts in the Apocalypse has been furnished by Edwin R. Thiele, *Outline Studies in Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1949), p. 7 (the pagination may vary in subsequent editions).

¹⁰In a disparaging vein, Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century A.D. referred to "solecisms" and "idiotisms" (see Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 7.25). For a brief modern analysis and discussion, see, e.g., Swete, pp. cxxiii-cxxv.

¹¹Compare, e.g., Robert H. Mounce's discussion of the "grammatical difficulties" in Rev 1:4 (*The Book of Revelation* [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977]), p. 68, and n. 13 on that page).

¹²Strand, "Two Aspects," p. 56, where I have noted the RSV, "God has given judgment for you against her"; the KJV, "God hath avenged you on her"; and the NIV, "God has judged her for the way she treated you." Most major English translations seem to provide the same nuances of thought: Virtually identical wording to that in the KJV occurs not only in the New KJV, but also in Goodspeed and in the *Twentieth-Century New Testament*. Very close in thought to the RSV rendition are K. S. Wuest, "God pronounced judgment for you against her"; the Berkeley Version, "On your behalf God has decided sentence against her"; the New Berkeley Version, "On your behalf God has passed judgment against her"; and the NAB, "God has

verses, there should be a more literal translation of the Greek than is normally given. The Greek reads ἔκρινεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ κρίμα ὑμῶν ἐξ αὐτῆς, which I earlier translated as “God has judged your judgment against [or, “on”] her.”¹³

In subsequent reflection on this verse and on my translation of it, I now feel that I did not myself render the text quite literally enough, in view of the context in which the statement occurs. The specific phrase to which I wish here to give a more literal rendering is the very last one in the verse: ἐξ αὐτῆς—literally, “out of her.” Thus, the statement regarding Babylon’s judgment should read, “God has judged your judgment out of her.”

Judgment “out of her”! But why this seemingly awkward declaration? For the solution, we must look to the OT sources of the imagery. The entire 18th chapter of Revelation represents a broad blending and merging of OT backgrounds. Among these is the “fall-of-Babylon” prophecy in Jer 50-51, as we noted in the second section of this article. However, perhaps even more prominent as background for the imagery in Rev 18 is the prophecy against Tyre in Ezek 26-28. The listing of trade wares and the lament of kings, merchants, and seafarers in Rev 18 draw especially heavily on Ezek 27:25-36 and 28:17-18. Could it be that with this sort of pervasive allusion in Rev 18 to these sections of Ezek 27 and 28, the striking phrase “out of her” in Rev 18:20 also finds its root source there?

Indeed so! It is an expression drawn from the language of Ezek 28:18: “So I brought forth fire out of the midst of you; it consumed you.” And thus, in Rev 18:20, which climaxes the litany concerning Babylon’s being destroyed by fire (vss. 9-19), there has been a *literal transmission* of the conceptualization (and terminology) “out of” that appears in the OT root source. The fact that the very text alluded to in Ezekiel also refers to a destruction by fire makes the allusion all the more impressive.

exacted punishment from her on your account.” Quite similar to the NIV is the TEV, “God has condemned her for what she did to you!” A nuance of thought slightly different from any of the foregoing occurs in the NEB, “in the judgement against her he [God] has vindicated your cause!”; and in C. K. Williams, “God has given judgement in your cause against her.” The main versions capturing the correct thought are the English Revised and the American Standard versions, whose wordings are identical, except for spelling (Am. Stand., “God hath judged your judgment on her”).

¹³In “Two Aspects,” p. 56, I have used the preposition “on”; in the diagram in *ibid.*, p. 54 (reprinted at the close of the present article), I have used “against.”

What we have in Rev 18:20b turns out, thus, to be an illustration of *intentionality* with respect to what might otherwise seem to be a rather peculiar use of the Greek language. It may be pointed out, further, that the presence of examples of this “literal-transmission” modality in Revelation should not be surprising, for both the exceptional richness of that book’s OT allusions and the fact that Revelation is an apocalyptic book would give cause for purposeful use of this modality. In fact, I suspect that this modality, although at times yielding for us “solecisms” and “semitisms” that may seem strange, actually served as a very useful communicative device—one with which John’s original readers and hearers were perfectly comfortable, and which, indeed, they appreciated and enjoyed.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

The Apocalypse is a Bible book that is exceptionally rich, not only in its imagery and symbolic representation, but also in the variety of modalities it utilizes in drawing upon OT materials. Our grasp of the nature and function of such modalities and the recognition of where and how they occur in the messages of the book will help us to grasp more fully the meaning of those messages—indeed, will be an important aid in illuminating for us significant nuances that we might otherwise miss. In addition, an understanding and recognition of these modalities may readily contribute, as well, to an upward assessment of the book’s Greek text—an assessment that sees the text as being, not the work of an ignoramus who unwittingly succumbed repetitively to a clumsy Greek style, but rather the masterwork of a nimble craftsman whose use of the Greek language served as an effective communicative tool to enhance the clarity and to heighten the forcefulness of his symbolic presentation.

¹⁴By no means do I intend to imply that the “literal-transmission” modality is the solution for all (or perhaps, even most) of Revelation’s “solecisms” and “semitisms.” What I would suggest, however, is twofold: First, this modality provides an explanation that is both reasonable and intelligible with respect to some of these phenomena as represented in the Apocalypse. Second, this very fact should lead us toward seeking rational explanations for the various other “solecisms” and “semitisms,” and should steer us away from the sorts of “solutions” that attribute the unusual character of Revelation’s Greek text to simply the writer’s ineptitude in using Greek, his purposeful choice of some kind of esoteric or “heavenly” language, etc.

