

Reviews

Siew, Antonius King Wai
The War between the Two Beasts and the Two
Witnesses: A Chiasmic Reading of Revelation 11.1–14.5
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London: T&T Clark, 2005.

Originally the book of Revelation contained no chapter or paragraph divisions or even verse markings; they were added by translators for ease of reference. Modern readers interpret texts in a linear fashion (A, B, C, D, E, F, G) however, the Hebrew prophets and poets of the O.T. structured their texts differently, as repetitions, parallelisms and chiasms (A, B, C, D, E, F, | G | F', E', D', C', B', A'). Events that are often understood to be chronologically linear actually function as parallel contemporaneous events, i.e., they are aspects of the same event, occurring at the same time. This is a characteristic of O.T. Hebrew poetry and prophecy - - Siew contends that the structure of Revelation follows the same literary conventions as the Hebrew O.T. The author of Revelation presents his material in a strictly ordered manner by creating a pattern of elements that he introduces one by one and that he then continues to discuss in reverse order.

Siew concentrates his efforts on Rev.11.1-14.5 which he has identified as a literary unit delineated by an *inclusio* (the measuring of the temple in 11.1 and the revelation of a temple in 14.5). Moreover, Siew argues that Rev.11 is integral to the whole unit (11.1-14.5) and chapter 11 should not (as many scholars do) be treated separately from 12.1-14.5. This unit (11.1-14.5) interrupts the neatly patterned and connected septets (seven letters, seals, trumpets, bowls) and the unit is located in the middle of Revelation, often regarded as providing a decisive interpretive key to the whole book.

The first section of his book is devoted to methodology; Siew discusses the literary genre of the book (prophetic rather than apocalyptic) and meticulously establishes criteria for identifying chiasms. Siew identifies the “war in heaven” (Rev.12.7-12) as the pivot of the chiasm (page 76):

- A** -11.1-2 (Temple Measured/Holy City Trampled)
- B** -11.3-6 (The Signs of the 2 Witnesses)
- C** -11.7-13 (The death, resurrection, and ascension of the 2 Witnesses)
- D** -11.15-19 (God’s Kingdom comes)
- E** -12.1-4 (The Dragon’s Conflict with the Woman)
- F** - 12.5-6 (The Woman’s Escape & Refuge)
- G** - 12.7-12 (The War in Heaven)
- F'** - 12.13-14 (The Woman’s Escape & Refuge)
- E'** -12.15-17 (The Dragon’s Conflict with the Woman)
- D'** - 13.1-6 (The Kingdom of the Beast/Dragon)
- C'** - 13.7-10 (The death of the Saints)
- B'** - 13.11-18 (The Signs of the 2nd Beast)
- A'** -14.1-5 (The Temple/Holy City Restored)

Both the weakness and the strength of this book is that it analyses at the micro-level (but not on the macro level). Many of the individual segments of larger chiasm are themselves micro-chiasms, which are further analysed in some detail; however, focus on 11.1-14.5 is restrictive. Siew notes in passing that the larger unit (11.1-14.5) is itself framed by Rev 10 (esp. 10, 7, 11) and 14.6-7 forming an *inclusio* on the whole chiasm. Perhaps if more attention was placed on the integration of Rev.10 and 11.1-14.5 within the trumpet section, Siew would not have reached the conclusion that the central motif is “war” (page 247, i.e., war in heaven//war between the two beasts and the two witnesses). Concentration on the larger framework (chaps 9-14) would have highlighted the importance of repentance as a motif (9.20-21, 11:13) and as the underlying reason for the prophetic competition (“war”) between the true and the false.

Although Siew rejects an early date for Revelation (before 70 C.E.), he suggests that the temple in 11.1-2 is a literal, physical temple - - this can only be achieved if the temple cult is restored - - therefore it refers to a temple that is yet to be constructed before the end time “tribulation”. The case for a literal reading is weak, especially as Siew rejects an early date. He fails to note the theological intent; although John is instructed to “measure” it is actually the two witnesses who perform the task (through their testimony). The inner sanctum of the temple is being “measured” (including the worshipers) at the same time as the outer court (court of the gentiles) is being trampled. A more likely explanation is that the witnessing mission results in a repentant remnant (11.13) during a time when Jerusalem is under gentile occupation. Moreover, the chiasm that Siew proposes parallels 11.1-2 with 14.1-5. However, a literal temple is not in view in 14:1-5, rather a body of redeemed people (cf.21.2); one supposes that the “worshipers” measured in 11.1 are included in this multitude. Siew understands the last section of Rev 11.15-19 which announces the arrival of the kingdom as incorporating the vial judgments of Revelation chapters 15-16 (page 122). This is likely as the seventh seal does not contain any prophetic message, but serves to introduce the seven trumpets, in similar fashion the seventh trumpet which heralds the kingdom, serves to introduce the seven bowls.

Despite the above criticisms, Siew’s book is an invaluable tool for serious students of Revelation. The approach that Siew adopts (supplemented with extensive scholarly references) is most certainly correct with its focus on structural and compositional patterns indicating parallel (not linear) events. This is reinforced by the fact that many events have the same chronological markers (1260 days/42 months). Reading Revelation from the perspective of a chiasm or ring composition generates new insights and builds on the work of Nils Lund and the commentary of Giblin on Revelation.

In the first century many Christians would have heard (rather than read) the texts - - constant repetition and parallel patterning make sense within this oral culture. Familiarity with the text by modern readers creates its own problems, especially as we are conditioned to understand narrative as a continuous linear flow. This approach forces us to look at the text with fresh eyes and to place the text in a Biblical context (Hebrew poetic/prophetic literary conventions) rather than Western notions of logical coherence. The interpretive benefits gained by such an approach are huge and Siew’s book represents an important step in discovering a new hermeneutic for the book of Revelation.