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Despite extensive research on the book of Revelation in recent times, some major and vexing problems remain unsolved. The composition of the book is one such issue. Significant research by established scholars such as Yarbro Collins, Schüssler Fiorenza, Bauckham, Vanni, Lambrecht, and several others yielded valuable insights but failed to produce anything close to a consensus. This publication, a slightly revised edition of the author’s doctoral thesis submitted at the University of Otago in New Zealand with Paul Trebilco and Tim Meadowcroft as supervisors, therefore investigates a relevant area of research, taking seriously the apt observation of Richard Bauckham that the major literary study that will do justice to Revelation as a composition has yet to be written (7).

This publication furthermore focuses on what is indeed one of the more problematic sections in Revelation as far as composition is concerned: Rev 11:1–14:5. These chapters are also noteworthy because they contain some of the best known and most discussed motifs and characters in Revelation. They seem to link the varying descriptions of the measuring of the temple, the two witnesses, the woman and the dragon, the war in heaven, and the two beasts rather loosely. They stand out in a book that is otherwise neatly patterned in terms of carefully designed and connected septets (seven letters, seals,
trumpets, bowls). What makes it so much more difficult is that these chapters are located in the middle of Revelation, often regarded as providing a decisive hermeneutical key to the meaning of the book as a whole. The time is indeed ripe for an exact appraisal of the composition of this major passage.

The publication investigates the literary structure of Rev 11:1–14:5 in terms of its form and content and argues that these chapters form a chiasm. Moving from a methodological discussion in the first chapter in which chiasm is understood in terms of Hebrew literary conventions and in which recent research on it is discussed, it then (ch. 2) argues in a more comprehensive manner how shared key words and motifs form 11:1–14:5 into a coherent whole. A more specific study of the subunits in Rev 11 is made in chapter 3, followed by a close analysis of 12:1–14:5 in chapter 4. These chapters are then once again discussed together in chapter 5 in terms of the mutual relationships between them, before the sixth chapter investigates the identity of the two witnesses and the two beasts. In general, then, these chapters are regarded as presenting a chiastic pattern in which the two witnesses in Rev 11 are linked with the two beasts in Rev 13. In them events in the penultimate war on earth between good and evil are described. This earthly combat frames and mirrors the heavenly conflict between Michael and the dragon in heaven and between the dragon and the woman described in Rev 12.

One of the problems with the study of the literary composition of Revelation up to this time is that scholars mostly, and understandably so, analyze the book as a whole and on a higher hierarchical level, without always being able to provide a close, detailed reading of individual passages. This publication addresses this problem by focusing in depth and on a microlevel on a specific part of the text. From a certain perspective, this is the more adequate method for a discussion of composition, since it investigates the text on its most concrete level and helps to avoid regressive argumentation. The more abstract macroanalysis of Revelation thus can be substantiated by particular readings of its constitutive parts and specific textual references. Because it can be expected that an author of such a carefully composed text would be consistent, a reading on this level will yield clues and models for the composition of the book on meso- and macrolevels.

It remains challenging, however, to concentrate thus intensely on a minute analysis, since the meaning of parts of a text is sometimes decisively determined by the nature and composition as a whole. Minute and detailed analyses nevertheless have become a pressing need. There is little choice: in this chicken or egg situation, the state of research with its often conflicting analyses of the book as a whole directives us at this point in time to such a close study of the text. It is exactly because of its focused analysis on the composition of these few chapters that this publication reveals inadequacies in past analyses but also offers some refreshing insights into the text.
Of special relevance is the literary technique that Siew develops in his exegetical approach. His method (building on significant work done in the field in recent times and correctly assuming the striking literary integrity of Revelation), explained in his first chapter, develops the literary convention of chiasm as key to understanding the composition of 11:1–14:5. The chiastic nature of these chapters, similar to the style of prophetic books in Hebrew Scriptures, not only reveals how carefully the material had been composed in a well-balanced structure but also sheds new light on its meaning—as he spells out in his following chapters.

It will be unfortunate if readers of this publication judge it in terms of the use of the designation “chiasm,” which is obviously a controversial term—especially because it is as a term of late origin and is thus linked anachronistically to a first-century text. It is sometimes understood exclusively in a technical sense as a much more limited literary figure of style (ABB’A’). The point that is made in this publication and that should not be blurred by the use of potentially controversial terminology is that 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. In order to avoid having this valuable compositional patterning questioned because of a potentially controversial term such as chiasm, more terminological precision and discussion of reservations about chiastic readings in this introductory chapter to the publication would have been helpful, or perhaps a more useful term such as ring composition could have been considered. But despite this, the fact remains that the material insights generated by the application of this figure of style are impressive. There can be little doubt that this publication significantly consolidates the important trend in recent research to read Revelation from the perspective of a chiasm or ring composition (see, e.g., the groundbreaking work of Nils Lund and the commentary of Giblin on Revelation).

Whatever one calls this patterning approach, it is there, and it is decisive for the interpretation of the book to understand the elements of this carefully designed pattern in their mutual relationships. In addition, the hermeneutical gains generated by this approach are huge. Such a chiastic-like approach serves to defamiliarize ancient texts such as Revelation by making us aware how they are composed in a manner that is not so common in our modern ways of text production, which is determined by other, contemporary ideals and norms for coherence and logic. It thus promotes a more precise historical study of the text as it opens our Western eyes to different ways of conceptualizing and producing texts. It is a patterning that also makes sense within an oral culture and within the oral setting of Revelation that promotes clarity through repetition. Such patterning also fits the educational and literary situation within the social context of the author.
The importance of a comparison of mutually related elements because of and within a chiasm is clearly illustrated by Siew in chapters 2–4, where he applies his method and his theoretical insights to his passage and develops the themes of war and worship, expressed in key words and motifs. He shows how they draw a double portrait that binds the contents of these chapters quite artfully: the heavenly war between the dragon and Michael in 12:7–12 (as the pivot of the chiasm) is paralleled by the double earthly combat between the two witnesses (Rev 11) and the two beasts (Rev 13) that frames it. The fifth chapter of this publication with the discussions of the different pairs in the chiasm that the author finds in 11:1–14:5 further offers illuminating perspectives. The many smaller sections in these chapters, causing interpretive headaches because of their perceived incoherence, are in fact chiastically linked and represent the development of important themes in a concentric and symmetrical manner.

There are quite a few challenging positions in this book—such as the literal reading of 11:1–2 and the attempt to reflect on the literal and symbolic use of characters and events in Revelation (22–28). One could pose the same question about consistency that Siew quotes elsewhere in reaction against a literal reading of the character of the male child in 12:5 to his own literal reading of 11:1–2. This is even more so when he regards the temple and city in 11:1–2 as literal but its measuring as symbolic. But these are specific issues that together with quite a few other questions about contents should not take the focus off the central thrust of this publication, namely, to describe the composition of 11:1–14:5. It is not that Siew’s compositional analysis is without problems in its detail—something that he himself acknowledges as a possibility (284). It is not always convincing, or it could be made more convincing if other parts of the text and certain other formal textual evidence could have been taken into account. Revelation 11:1–14:5 is, for example, embedded in the septet of trumpets, as is pointed out in many ways in Siew’s publication. But it is a question how Rev 10 about the little scroll (and not only 10:11) relates to the chapters under investigation and affects the chiastic pattern found in 11:1–14:5. Even more important, the explicit integration of 10:1–14:5 in the septet of seven trumpets creates a larger coherence that has clear implications for understanding this passage: in the septet of trumpets, for example, the sixth (!) trumpet focuses quite intensely and, significantly, also climactically on the motif of repentance (9:20–21), confirming how uppermost this motif was in the mind of John, especially in terms of the times before the end. After mooting this motif, the author of Revelation then moves on with new material, inserting the narrative about the two witnesses, thereby setting up a framework within which they should be understood. Siew, following Satake, rejects the theory that the two witnesses proclaim repentance to the nations, stressing that they “herald God’s war on the world” and are thus executors of judgment (247). This view is problematic in the light of the statement that the nations glorified God after the ascension of the witnesses (11:13).
Given John’s preference for contrasting motifs and symbols, the giving of glory to God as an act of repentance mentioned as the climax of the narrative about the two witnesses must be related to and thus understood in terms of his previous references to the lack of repentance following the judgments in the sixth trumpet. In other words, the wider context of the septet of trumpets by necessity need to be taken into account in order to appreciate the meaning of its constitutive parts—which includes 11:1–14:5. This supports the view of many scholars who more convincingly regard the two witnesses as proclaimers of repentance—an issue that is of special significance for interpreting Revelation. Given the focus of this publication on a particular section, it is understandable that the wider context cannot always be mooted—which illustrates the above-mentioned restrictions that is typical of an analysis on the microlevel. But this example of Siew’s unconvincing portrayal of the two witnesses illustrates why the careful microanalysis in this publication now awaits to be tested against information in the immediate context of the passage and the book as a whole. The important, original, and fresh contribution of this publication to the issue of composition, made possible by the detailed approach, is, therefore, but a first step toward further work that will inevitably require revision of some of its insights.

For the rest, I also enjoyed this work because it addresses the key issue about the future element in Revelation. Siew focuses on Rev 11 in his chapter 3, which, with its four subunits and its temporal/spatial indicators denoting three and a half years and the physical Jerusalem, would describe to the readers events (the trampling of the city and the ministry of the two witnesses) that will take place in the future before the final coming of the kingdom on earth. His reading in this regard will surprise some, but it certainly has special merit. The future element in Revelation is an issue that already Bousset, who otherwise decisively promoted the historical reading of the book in terms of a Greco-Roman context, pointed out as of key importance for understanding the book. It is an issue that does not always receive the attention it deserves, so that this publication is to be welcomed for once again drawing attention to it. In tandem with this, I found the criticism of the conventional identifications of characters in Rev 12–13 with Roman rulers and institutions equally valuable (in his ch. 6, in which he discusses the identity of the characters in this passage).

This work impresses with its extensive discussion of secondary mainstream research but also of scholarship from outside traditional centers and countries of learning. More important, it engages thoroughly with the primary text. Its major contribution, however, is to be found in its contribution toward consolidating the trend in scholarship that researches the so-called chiastic readings of New Testament texts and that develops its great potential for biblical interpretation.