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# THE PROBLEM OF THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS: AN EVALUATION AND A PROPOSAL

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*The literary structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews is uniquely complex. In a writing so multifaceted, where topics are foreshadowed and repeated, differences of opinion must inevitably arise regarding the precise divisions of the argument. This essay examines three specific approaches to the structure of Hebrews: the traditional view, which divides the epistle into doctrinal and practical parts; the detailed literary analysis of A. Vanhoye; and the "patchwork" approach, which follows the changing themes of the letter from chapter to chapter without submitting every detail to one overriding theory of structure. Though each approach has its strengths, Vanhoye's offers the clearest analysis of the epistle. Detecting an intricate theme woven in an intricate style, he sets his analysis on a firmer base as part of a broad literary approach to the epistle.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

LITERARY structures, to use a scientific analogy, are like those mysterious species of fish which live on the ocean floor. As soon as they are brought to the surface to be examined, the change in pressure is too great for them, and they explode, leaving their investigators in a state of frustration and bewilderment.

This analogy unquestionably applies more to the structure of Hebrews than to any other major NT writing.<sup>1</sup> The common reader

<sup>1</sup>C. Spicq has voiced a similar opinion: "One's first contact with the Epistle to the Hebrews is forbidding. In fact, in all the collection of the NT writings, this letter is, with the Apocalypse, the most distant from the literary point of view of our western and modern mentality" (my translation) (*L'Épître aux Hébreux* [EB; Paris: Lecoffre, 1950] 1. 1).

may know the picture-gallery of faithful men and women in chap. 11, the mysterious name Melchizedek, something of the priestly and sacrificial imagery, and possibly certain vivid passages, such as "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith," but he may be unaware of the total nature of the author's thought. Indeed for many Christians the epistle has been reduced to a collection of proof-texts and memory-verses—a sort of biblical telephone directory, with chapter and verse instead of area code and number.

But if the common man has found it difficult to follow the author's movement of thought in Hebrews, the NT specialist has not fared any better. The study of the structure of Hebrews has followed a course like that of the Meander itself. With the passing of time, a sufficient amount of silt has accumulated to discourage even the most ambitious expositor. If the author had a carefully planned structure before him in writing, his arrangement is not easily perceived by his more distant successors, a fact which no doubt is behind the multitude of proposed outlines for the epistle.

This situation is especially unfortunate in the modern era, which is marked by a common recognition that literary insight and perception of structure and patterns are absolutely necessary if the NT documents are to be adequately understood. Phrases by themselves, or phrases strung together randomly, are of relatively little use, a fact known by anyone who has visited a foreign country armed only with a dictionary and no knowledge of the language. In biblical exegesis, as in general linguistics, language is not an accidental junk-pile consisting of a haphazard collection of different items. Instead it is more like a jigsaw puzzle, where each piece fits into those which surround it, and where an isolated piece simply cannot make any sense if it is removed from its proper place in the overall pattern. Concisely put, analysis must include synthesis if a text is to be fully appreciated. A thorough-going structural treatment is therefore essential if for no other reason than it enables the expositor to understand how a NT author has composed his work and how each part fits the whole.

The literary structure of Hebrews is uniquely complex. In a writing so multifaceted, where topics are naturally foreshadowed and repeated, differences of opinion must inevitably arise as to the precise divisions of the argument. Some very specific—and novel—suggestions have been put forward to explain the progress of thought in Hebrews, and we shall examine some of the more interesting of these in this essay (without any risk of the pages exploding before us).

#### THE TRADITIONAL DIVISION

On the most basic level, Hebrews is understood to consist of two main parts of unequal length, 1:5–10:18 and 10:19–13:17. They are held together by a brief but polished introduction (1:1–4) and a

conclusion containing final prayers and benedictions (13:18-21), to which is appended a postscript containing further personalia and a final brief benediction (13:22-25). The contents of 1:1-10:18 are called dogmatic or kerygmatic; the contents of 10:19-13:17 are labelled ethical, parenetic, or didactic.

This idea was well stated by John Brown over a century ago: "The Epistle divides itself into two parts—the first Doctrinal, and the second Practical—though the division is not so accurately observed that there are no duties enjoined or urged in the first part, and no doctrines stated in the second."<sup>2</sup> Brown goes on to speak of "the great doctrine" and "the great duty" of the epistle, referring to the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, and the believer's constancy of faith, respectively. Shown first is the superiority of Christianity to the angels, through whom the law of Moses was given (1:5-2:18); secondly, to Moses himself (3:1-4:13); and thirdly, to the Jewish high priest Aaron and his ministry (4:14-10:18). Jesus as Son, Apostle, and Great High Priest infinitely transcends them all. Thereafter follows the practical application of this truth, which consists first in a general exhortation to faith and endurance (10:19-12:25), and secondly in a variety of practical exhortations related to the Christian life (13:1-17).<sup>3</sup>

Granted that such a picture of Hebrews needs to be complemented by other details, on the whole it is representative of much of conservative Protestant scholarship today. Homer Kent (1972), Edmond Hiebert (1977), and Donald Guthrie (1983) understand the epistle in much the same way. Kent, distinguishing the abstract truths of the first part of the letter from the admonitions which begin in 10:19, writes: "This section of Hebrews consists of a series of exhortations based upon the great doctrinal truths set forth previously."<sup>4</sup> Hiebert, despite his acknowledgment that the doctrinal interest of Hebrews goes hand in hand with the practical, divides the epistle into "doctrinal" and "practical" parts.<sup>5</sup> Guthrie, a recent commentator on Hebrews, gives the following titles to the two parts: "I. The Superiority of the Christian Faith. II. Exhortations."<sup>6</sup> The latter's opinion on the subject is most apparent when he writes on 10:19 that "the application of the preceding doctrinal discussion begins here."<sup>7</sup> For these writers the

<sup>2</sup>John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews* (New York: Carter and Brothers, 1862) 1. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 197.

<sup>5</sup>D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (3 vols., Chicago: Moody, 1977) 3. 92-100.

<sup>6</sup>Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 58-59.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 210; so also Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1934) 20-24.

proclamation of Christ's supremacy, made during the main doctrinal section, prepares the reader for the concluding chapters which focus upon the practical consequences of the theological arguments supplied earlier. Since the same sequence is also found in many of Paul's letters (e.g., Galatians, Romans, Ephesians), even when doctrinal and parenthetic elements are intermingled (e.g., 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians), the bipartition of Hebrews appears to be a balanced and logical conclusion.

But some modification of this traditional view seems to be underway. What was formerly assumed to be the epistle's kerygmatic first part (1:5-10:18) has been shown to be a highly systematic "interweaving [of] massive argument and earnest exhortation."<sup>8</sup> Such basically hortatory passages as 2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 4:14-16; and 5:11-6:12 incline the careful student of Hebrews to regard these passages as integral to the main purpose of the author. To label them "digressions" or "inserted warnings" is to beg the question of the author's purpose in including them in this part of his writing with such frequency. However dogmatic and doctrinal the teaching of 1:5-10:18, it stands closely related to the exhortations which are interspersed throughout. What, then, happened to the kerygma of Hebrews? According to Nauck<sup>9</sup> and Kümmel,<sup>10</sup> kerygmatic and parenthetic elements are so intermingled that it is no longer possible to differentiate them. Kümmel even concluded that the hortatory passages which supposedly "interrupt" the epistle "are actually the real goal of the entire exposition."<sup>11</sup> He suggests that the underlying structure of Hebrews is indicated by the parenthetic passages alone, which stand in parallel form at the beginning and end of each of the three main sections of the epistle. This would result in the following outline:

- I. Hear the word of God in the Son, Jesus Christ, who is higher than the angels and Moses (1:1-4:13).
- II. Let us approach the high priest of the heavenly sanctuary and hold fast our confession (4:14-10:31).
- III. Hold fast to Jesus Christ, who is the initiator and perfecter of faith (10:32-13:17).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Alexander Purdy, "Hebrews," *IB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955) 11. 580.

<sup>9</sup>W. Nauck, "Zum Aufbau des Hebräerbriefes," *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche* (1960) 199-206.

<sup>10</sup>Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. H. C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 390.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* Cf. the comment by Otto Michel: "The high point of the theological thought lies in the parenthetic parts, which exhort the listeners to obedience and seek to prepare the church for suffering" (my translation) (*Der Brief an die Hebräer* [KKNT 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975] 27).

<sup>12</sup>Kümmel, *Introduction*, 390-92. Michel's outline is very similar (*Hebräer*, 6):  
1. The Speaking of God in the Son and the Superiority of the Son to the Old Covenant

Thus for Kümmel, the whole of Hebrews is nothing other than an extended epistolary parenthesis, consisting of exhortations regarding the privileges and responsibilities of the Christian life.

Kümmel's judgment on the subject is not widely held, but it may be the most prudent. As Markus Barth astutely observed with reference to the structure of Ephesians, the juxtaposition of indicative and imperative (i.e., kerygma and parenthesis) may have exhausted its usefulness.<sup>13</sup> Their imposition upon a complicated document like Hebrews is as inappropriate as the attempt to measure the length of the Grand Canyon with a barometer. Such a method cannot fail to overlook the essential nature of the epistle from beginning to end. Floyd Filson in particular has declared Heb 13:22 to be the key to the whole epistle and its literary structure.<sup>14</sup> In the phrase, "my word of exhortation," the author of Hebrews gives us the most apt description possible to state the nature and purpose of his writing. Hebrews is a written message, which sets forth doctrine, not for its own sake, but only to show the recipients how great a privilege they have to be related to Christ and what an immense loss they would suffer if they should allow anything to rob them of their faith in him. With every pronouncement containing important theological content, the author urges his readers to realize how much is at stake in their response to the gospel. The doctrinal content of the first ten chapters is therefore not an end in itself but merely a means to an end: to exhort these Christians to hold fast their faith, confession, and obedience. Hence "we understand Hebrews rightly only if we keep the urgent note of exhortation clearly before us in all our discussion of the form and meaning of the writing."<sup>15</sup>

If the traditional view of Hebrews sees in this epistle no more than a correspondence of preaching and teaching, of God's activity for man and man's good works for God in response, it may miss what the

(1:1-4:13). II. Jesus the True High Priest (4:14-10:39). III. The Way of Faith of the People of God in the Past and the Present (11:1-13:25) (my translation). Th. Haering's division of the letter is also much the same, though he holds to the partition of Hebrews into two (not three) *Hauptteile*: 1:1-4:13 and 4:14-13:25 ("Gedankengang und Grundgedanken des Hebr.," *ZNTW* 18 [1918] 145-64, esp. 156).

<sup>13</sup>Markus Barth, *Ephesians* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1974), I, 54-55. The criticism of this juxtaposition with regard to Hebrews is found as early as the commentary of Hans Windisch (*Der Hebräerbrief* [HNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr, 1931] 8): "First of all it must be emphasized that Hebrews cannot be divided into a so-called theoretical and a practical part, but rather that the parenthesis time and again interrupts the flow of the witness to faith and Scripture" (my translation).

<sup>14</sup>Floyd V. Filson, "Yesterday," *A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13* (SBT 4; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967) 16-26.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 21. On the extensive sections of Hebrews given over to exhortation he writes: "The biblical exposition gives the background and basis for such repeated exhortations, but such exposition is not the author's basic interest and purpose" (p. 19).

epistle intends to say in particular. Scholars who push this juxtaposition so far have been unable to avoid questionable methods or to answer the objection that this procedure is arbitrary and forced. Moreover, the method fails to take into consideration the letter's obvious stylistic and rhetorical devices, specifically the recurring use of chiasm, hook-words, announcements, etc.<sup>16</sup> But at least one concession to this approach is necessary. If the distinction between dogmatic and parenetic parts of the letter does not determine its external structure, it nevertheless contributes a great deal to the elucidation of its contents. For even if the author's main purpose all the way through is a supremely practical one, his method of dealing with the difficulties facing his readers is essentially doctrinal: to lay before them the permanent significance of Christianity and especially the absolute superiority of the person and office of Christ to Judaism. This is the heart of the author's subject and can be epitomized in the resounding "we have" (*indicative mood*) of the epistle's key verse: "We have such a high priest" (8:1).

#### THE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF A. VANHOYE

But the most recent research of Albert Vanhoye, the noted Jesuit scholar and editor of *Biblica*, leads us still further. Building upon an earlier suggestion of Vaganay, Vanhoye claims to have found in Hebrews a carefully constructed chiasmic structure, repeatedly interwoven by key words which appear at the beginning of a section and then reappear at or very near to the close of the section.<sup>17</sup> For example, the mention of "angels" in 1:4 leads into the section on the Son and the angels beginning in 1:5. "Angels" appears again in 2:16, where it serves to mark off a literary unit by restating at the end what was said at the beginning. The structure of Hebrews also includes announcements and anticipations on the author's part of subjects that are to be treated. In 1:4 he announces that Christ has a better name than the angels and then explores this theme in 1:5-2:18. In 2:17-18 he states that Christ is a merciful and faithful high priest and then treats this topic in 3:1-5:10. The subject of 5:11-10:39—the sacerdotal work of Christ, a priest like Melchizedek—is announced in 5:9-10 in the pronouncement that Christ was "designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." Then, in 10:36-39 he speaks of men of endurance and faith, and well illustrates the character of such men in 11:1-12:13. Finally, in 12:13 the author exhorts his readers, "make straight paths

<sup>16</sup>See my discussion of style below.

<sup>17</sup>Albert Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Desclée, 1963).

for your feet," and follows in 12:14–13:18 by urging specific ways by which this can be done.

Vanhoye's analysis has much in its favor and is due more attention than it has received. Perhaps the character and weight of his treatment would make a more decisive contribution to the identity of the literary structure of Hebrews if it were briefly summarized in English. What follows are excerpts from Vanhoye's findings occasionally augmented by further observations.<sup>18</sup>

The opening division of Hebrews (1:5–2:18) comprises two dogmatic sections (1:5–15 and 2:5–18) with a short parenthetic section between (2:1–4). The first dogmatic section deals with the Son's position as God, the second shows his connection with mankind, the author's purpose being to show that Christ is both the Son of God and the brother of men. Each dogmatic section forms a unity, as indicated by the repetition of key expressions at both ends of each passage (cf. 1:5 and 1:13: "to which of the angels did he ever say?"; 2:5 and 2:16: "it is not to angels"). With these statements the author has expressed his main thoughts. On the one hand, Jesus Christ is one with God (1:5–14); on the other hand, he is one with men (2:5–18). In either case he is superior to angels. It is necessary, therefore, to heed what he says (2:1–4).

In 2:17–18 the second main division of the letter is announced. For the first time, the author speaks of the priesthood of Christ. Here he gives Jesus the title of "high priest" and adds to it two important characteristics, "merciful" and "faithful."

In this new division, 3:1–5:10, the author focuses on both of these adjectives, though in reverse order. Jesus is presented first as a faithful high priest in matters concerning God, his Father (3:1–4:14), then as a high priest who is full of compassion toward men, his brothers (4:15–5:10). One can easily see the connection between these two aspects of the discussion and what was said in the first division of the letter, where the topic was Christ the Son of God (1:5–14) and the brother of men (2:5–18).

In this first subsection, 3:1–4:14, the vocabulary is that of faith: "faithful" (3:2, 5); "assurance" (3:14); "believed" (4:3); "faith" (4:2); and "unbelief" (3:12, 19). The theme of faith is thus central in this

<sup>18</sup>The literature which has been produced by Vanhoye on this subject is enormous. In addition to his seminal monograph cited in the preceding note, see esp. the following: *Situation du Christ* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1969); "Discussions sur la structure de l'Épître aux Hébreux," *Bib* 55 (1974) 349–80; "La question littéraire de Hébreux 13, 1–6," *NTS* 23 (1977) 121–39; and "Situation et signification de Hébreux 5, 1–10," *NTS* 23 (1977) 445–56. Our synopsis of Vanhoye's analysis of the structure of Hebrews is based on the author's own summary: "Literarische Struktur und theologische Botschaft des Hebräerbriefes (1. Teil)," *SNTU* 4 (1979) 119–47.



section. A short explanation (3:2-6) is followed by a long exhortation (3:7-4:14). In the explanation Christ is said to be faithful. The exhortation brings out the response: we must answer with our faith. In 4:15-5:10, however, the discussion shifts to Christ as a merciful high priest, a theme which emphasizes how far this high priest went to share our condition (cf. 5:7-8). Heb 5:9-10 then functions as a transition to the third main division of the letter. Here three statements are made concerning Christ: (1) he achieved perfection; (2) he is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him; and (3) he has been designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Such are the main themes of the longest division of Hebrews, 5:11-10:39.

This third division is more complex than the others. The author declares openly that the explanation of his subject will not be easy (5:11), and in a lengthy admonition he warns his readers to pay careful attention (5:11-6:20). After this "introduction" the author discusses three unique yet interrelated themes, those which he had already mentioned in 5:9-10. Section A (7:1-18) considers the person and status of the priest. Christ is not a priest according to the order of Aaron but according to the new order which was foreviewed in the OT in the mysterious Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Gen 14:18-20). Section B (8:1-9:28) considers the process by which this priest can stand before God. Christ came to God on the basis of a new offering which brought him "perfection." Section C (10:1-18) considers the use to which people can put Christ's perfect sacrifice. This offering is perfect in its effect: it results in the full forgiveness of sins and the sanctification of the believer. Thus in these three sections the author has discussed the three essential elements of priestly mediation: the status of the priest, his offering, and the application of his sacrifice to the people. This last point leads into yet another solemn warning passage (10:19-39).

The fourth main division of Hebrews is announced in 10:36-39, where the word "faith" functions as a hook-word connecting 10:39 ("those who have faith") to 11:1 ("now faith is . . ."). What follows in 11:2-40 is a very graphic picture of the great deeds of those under the Old Covenant, as well as a description of those times when their faith was tested. At the beginning of chap. 12, however, the emphasis changes. The readers are now invited to run with endurance the race set before *them*, following the example of Christ, "who endured the cross" (12:1-2). This exhortation to endurance continues to the final injunction in 12:13 to "make straight paths for your feet." In the Greek text the close connection between this verse and 12:1 is made obvious by the author's use of two words which share the same root ("paths" and "run").

The fifth and final division is introduced to the reader in 12:13. The preceding passage concluded with the words, "therefore, strengthen

Chart 1

		1:1-4	Introduction
I		1:5-2:18	The Name of Jesus
II	A	3:1-4:14	Jesus, Trustworthy High Priest
	B	4:15-5:10	Jesus, Compassionate High Priest
III		5:11-6:20	(Preliminary Exhortation)
	A	7:1-28	According to the Order of Melchizedek
	B	8:1-9:28	Perfection Achieved
	C	10:1-18	Source of Eternal Salvation
		10:19-39	(Closing Exhortation)
IV	A	11:1-40	The Faith of the Men of Old
	B	12:1-13	The Necessity of Endurance
V		12:14-13:18	Make Straight Paths
		13:20-21	Conclusion

the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble. . . ." These words are taken from Isa 35:3 and fit well with the theme of endurance. Then there follows a statement taken not from Isaiah but from Proverbs (4:26): "and make straight paths for your feet." The theme thus introduced is not that of endurance but rather one of behavior; hence what follows is a series of directives for the Christian life. The first sentence of this new division gives the direction in which "the paths" should go: "pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14). It is instructive that just as the first division of Hebrews (1:5-2:18) included a short interlude (2:1-4), so also does this division. This short subsection (13:1-6) is located between two longer ones, the first emphasizing "sanctification" (12:14-29), the second the communal life of the church ("peace"; 13:7-18).

It is difficult to give a coherent picture of the structural components in Vanhoye's analysis because of the enormous amount of details which characterizes it. Vanhoye envisages a reconstruction totally unlike anything we have seen before, yet one which results in a relatively coherent and self-authenticating structure. His general outline of Hebrews, with slight modification, is reproduced in Chart 1.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Vanhoye, "Literarische Struktur," 133.

According to this plan, Hebrews is comprised of five concentrically arranged parts with several subsections<sup>20</sup> (see Chart 2). The first and fifth parts of Vanhoye's arrangement have only one section apiece, while the second and fourth parts have two subsections each. The third part, which has three subsections, clearly receives the emphasis. The midpoint of this concentric structure is 8:1-9:28, what the author himself terms "the point of what we are saying" (8:1).

Despite its complicated appearance, the fundamental principle of Vanhoye's reading of the text is simply that nothing in the discourse results from chance. The text is the product of unconscious stylistic features as well as those conscious factors of which the author is quite cognizant. In sum, Vanhoye's analysis of Hebrews presupposes that everything in the text is motivated.

One recognizes in this epistle the work of a true man of letters whose extraordinary talent is enhanced by excellent powers of organization. In these pages nothing seems left to chance; on the contrary, the choice of words, the rhythm and construction of phrases, the arrangement of different themes, all appear to be controlled by the pursuit of a harmonious balance in which subtle variations contribute to a wisely calculated symmetry.<sup>21</sup>

The analyst should therefore be attentive to significant elements within the text that will enable him to bring to light some of its underlying structure and symmetry. He should be particularly attentive to the stylistic devices in the author's language and composition. These factors, when accurately defined, supply important clues for an understanding of the biblical author's purpose in writing.

Vanhoye's contribution to the study of the structure of Hebrews, as important and ground-breaking as it is, has unfortunately suffered from those twin enemies of new research—neglect and temerarious opinion. Philip Hughes criticizes Vanhoye's research but fails to interact with it, stating simply in a footnote: "Vanhoye in his detailed study seems to me to err on the side of overstatement and to tend to find more stylistic symmetries and literary subtleties than are really present."<sup>22</sup> Kümmel pronounces his view to be "contrived,"<sup>23</sup> but offers no evidence to support his verdict. The tendency represented by Hughes and Kümmel to ignore this new treatment is unfortunately represented in the majority of the latest commentators on the epistle. Bristol (1967), Schierse (1969), Turner (1975), G. Hughes (1979),

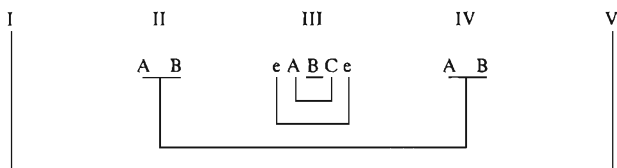
<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Vanhoye, *La structure*, 11.

<sup>22</sup>Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) n. 2.

<sup>23</sup>Kümmel, *Introduction*, 390.

Chart 2



Jewett (1981), Brown (1982), Morris (1983), and Hagner (1983) all register no sign of Vanhoye's influence, though his work appeared in 1963.<sup>24</sup> Occasionally it is alluded to, only to be passed over. This rejection is mainly on the grounds that it makes the study of Hebrews more esoteric than it need be, or that it proceeds from the fertile imagination of the expositor rather than the text itself, both of which are highly subjective objections themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Neil Lightfoot in his commentary is a notable exception to the prevailing attitude, however.<sup>26</sup> His reticence to accept *in toto* Vanhoye's conclusions cannot be equated with an attempt to ignore or dodge the issue. Like Vanhoye, Lightfoot pays the unknown author of Hebrews high tribute because of the originality of his thought and his art of systematic arrangement. The divisions suggested by Vanhoye offer plausible solutions to many questions that were often considered unanswerable. But to Lightfoot the comprehensiveness of the theory is not sufficient to demonstrate its validity: "[Just] because the author

<sup>24</sup>Lyle O. Bristol, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1967); F. J. Schierse, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); George Allen Turner, *The New and Living Way* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975); Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: University Press, 1979); Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981); Raymond Brown, *Christ Above All* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982); Leon Morris, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); and Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

<sup>25</sup>Cf. the objection of Otto Kuss that "the current evidence of a systematic arrangement speaks more of the determination and hypothetical sagacity of the exegete in question than of a genuinely intelligible methodicalness of an artificial composition of the unknown author" (my translation) (*Der Brief an die Hebräer* [Regensburg: Pustet, 1966] 14). Vanhoye's analysis is also open to the minor criticisms voiced by J. Bligh, "The Structure of Hebrews," *HeyJ* 5 (1964) 170-77; Michel, *Hebräer*, 31-34; and J. Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 1-6," *Bib* 53 (1972) 368-85.

<sup>26</sup>Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

makes anticipations and announcements, it does not follow that his outline must strictly coincide with his announcements."<sup>27</sup> Although he shares Vanhoye's interest in the style of Hebrews, Lightfoot is nevertheless disposed to follow a more conventional outline.

I would venture to suggest that expositors of Hebrews would profit immensely from the thoughtful contribution of Vanhoye. If it does not enjoy the status of absolute certainty (and what theory does?), it should nonetheless be studied as a viable alternative to the more traditional interpretation. Elements of careful structure are obvious in the epistle, but to recognize them the interpreter must be able to identify the formal criteria of literary analysis. The great merit of Vanhoye's treatment is that it shows concretely how an understanding of structural linguistics can serve the expositor. Lightfoot has presented an exhaustive description of the special stylistic devices exhibited in Hebrews, including chiasm, inclusion, hook-words, and announcements. He has shown that precisely the same style is characteristic of much of the teaching of Jesus, in which traces of inverted word order and repetition of thought can be detected. What Vanhoye and Lightfoot have done is to set this type of structural analysis on a firmer base as part of a broader approach to the NT documents and especially to Hebrews. Vanhoye in particular has innovatively drawn our attention to the fact that whoever wrote the epistle had been very well schooled in the art of composition. In Hebrews, unlike perhaps any other NT letter, the special topic treated, the peculiar issues involved, and the unique purpose in writing all find their reflection in the literary style chosen for addressing the readers. Thus, to ascribe to the author the skillful selection and ordering of material along the lines of Vanhoye's reconstruction does not seem unwarranted.

Vanhoye's chief contribution is his demonstration that the epistle sets forth an intricate theme by means of an intricate style. Hugh Montefiore, practically alone among modern commentators, has accepted Vanhoye's study on that basis: "His study carries conviction because the structure he proposes appears to have been worked out by our author as rigorously as the logic of his Epistle."<sup>28</sup> There is,

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 50. Bligh ("Structure," 175) also questions "whether a division based on purely literary criteria will reveal the conceptual structure of the Epistle."

<sup>28</sup>Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 31. The only other commentator who can be cited in support of Vanhoye is George Wesley Buchanan in the Anchor Bible series (*To the Hebrews* [AB 36; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972] x): "The outline of this commentary has been modified in several places to concur with the insights on structure published by Albert Vanhoye." In his monograph on the structure of Hebrews Louis Dussaut has offered a structural synopsis of Hebrews based essentially on the results of Vanhoye's analysis, whose conclusions he has wholeheartedly endorsed with the exception that the five divisions offered by Vanhoye (1 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 1) are modified to three

however, one outstanding difficulty in the scheme of Vanhoye. His schematization of the letter exposes many stylistic traits, but his method at the same time makes several unwarranted deletions to secure perfect symmetry.<sup>29</sup> In the light of the studies presented by Tasker,<sup>30</sup> Spicq,<sup>31</sup> and Filson<sup>32</sup> in defense of the authenticity of chap. 13, Vanhoye's conjecture that 13:19 and 13:22-25 were later added to the original work can scarcely be accepted. This minor disagreement should not, however, detract from Vanhoye's overall contribution to the study of Hebrews. His suggestion can only be considered as tentative, but the possibility that the epistle follows his reconstruction has a great deal to be said for it.

#### THE "PATCHWORK" APPROACH

Unwilling to accept the traditional model and in apparent opposition to those engaged in refined literary analyses of Hebrews stand authors like F. F. Bruce and Leon Morris. The former treats the usual problems of introduction but surprisingly fails to consider the question of literary form and structure.<sup>33</sup> The latter understands Hebrews to be epistolary rather than sermoniac in form but fails to discuss the ramifications of this for his outline of the letter.<sup>34</sup> Both are content to follow the chapters and changing themes of the epistle from one aspect to another without submitting every detail to one overriding theory of structure. For example, Morris subdivides Hebrews into eleven units, without marking any main divisions (pp. 13-15).

In light of the variety of views on the subject of Hebrews's structure, an open verdict is perhaps a safe course to follow, and here the opinion of Origen on the question of authorship may well be applicable. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that an author of such skill should have failed to illuminate the structure in which his epistle was cast. It is, of course, conceivable that he designed his letter without any clearly defined thread of thought running through it. But a thing is not true because it is conceivable, but because the facts require it, and this does not appear to be the case here. There are many features of language and style which cannot be passed over so lightly

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(2 + 3 + 2). See Louis Dussaut, *Synopse structurale de l'Épître aux Hébreux: Approche d'analyse structurale* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1981).

<sup>29</sup>Vanhoye, *La structure*, 219-21.

<sup>30</sup>R. V. G. Tasker, "The Integrity of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *ExpT* 47 (1935-6) 136-38.

<sup>31</sup>C. Spicq, "L'authenticité du chapitre XIII de l'Épître aux Hébreux," *ConNT* 11 (1947) 226-36.

<sup>32</sup>Filson, "Yesterday," 15-16.

<sup>33</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 1964).

<sup>34</sup>Morris, *Hebrews*, 12-13.

and which imply a much closer liaison between the thought of the author and the structure of his writing. It can hardly be maintained, therefore, that the author had no design before him while writing *currente calamo*. A writer who has an important message to proclaim may be expected to put it in a form more readily understood than this approach supposes. Consequently, whatever the merits of a "patchwork" outline, its considerable demerit is that it is achieved at the expense of a procedure which cannot commend itself as being in accordance with the principles of scientific criticism.

None of this is meant disparagingly. It simply underscores the truism that NT scholarship has been somewhat hesitant to take the plunge when it comes to epistolary literary criticism. Some commentators give a brief treatment; others give the question of structure no separate consideration at all. Some writers would like to think (or give the impression) that the outlining of Hebrews is a rapid, simple process. The real problem is, of course, far more complex, bewildering, and time-consuming. Scholarship stands still in no field, least of all in biblical studies, and a facile approach to the structural complexities of a document like Hebrews can easily lead to a situation in which one sees an amazing number of trees or even tiny plants, but fails to see the forest at all. A letter should be viewed in the great sections that constitute its whole and not simply in detached portions.

#### CONCLUSION

Summing up this meager review of the structural criticism of Hebrews, attention may be drawn to three points. First, the point of departure for the discussion of this question today—at least in my opinion—must be the thesis of Albert Vanhoye. At least at one point his analysis should achieve universal acceptance, namely the insight into the obvious stylistic devices employed by the author. Despite a weak attack against it, this aspect of his theory has proved its essential correctness as attested by Lightfoot, Montefiore, and Dussaut. There remains, it is true, a *je ne sais quoi* of authorship which excludes dogmatism or pedantry of any kind. But the detailed literary and stylistic investigation attempted by Vanhoye has resulted in the amassing of a phalanx of objective literary facts which simply cannot be ignored. Even if his study should prove to be factually untenable in the present case, the modern exegete should not shrink from a discreetly handled structural analysis of the text.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Vanhoye's analysis has already led to several helpful studies on the structure of specific pericopes in Hebrews. See e.g. P. Auffret, "Note sur la structure littéraire d'Hb ii. 1-4," *NTS* 25 (1979) 166-79; W. Schrenk, "Hebräerbrief 4, 14-16. Textlinguistik als Kommentierungsprinzip," *NTS* 26 (1980) 242-52; and P. Auffret, "Essai sur la structure littéraire et l'interprétation d'Hébreux 3, 1-6," *NTS* 26 (1980) 380-96.

Second, in view of the questionable usefulness of the juxtaposition of kerygma and parenesis as a hermeneutical tool, and of the great force of the warnings and exhortations found in chaps. 1-10, it may be inappropriate to divide the letter based on doctrinal and practical distinctions. The epistle presents its dogmatic themes in the function not of intellectual instruction but of the encouragement which the author seeks to inspire in the face of a crisis. Addressed as it is to a specific situation which called for both compassion and correction, Hebrews is no mere doctrinal treatise or theoretical essay. To understand it, or sections of it, in this manner is to miss the spirit of urgency which pervades the letter from beginning to end and which motivated the author to take up his pen in the first place.

Finally, even though expositors may continue to disagree among themselves as to the exact structure of Hebrews, there is still virtually unanimous agreement that illuminating exegesis involves an openness and receptivity to the text which are characteristic of the grammatico-historical study of the Scripture. In allowing the text to speak for itself and the author to be his own interpreter, one observes in Hebrews the literary mastery of an author who composed his *magnum opus* with the care of a Michelangelo working on the Sistine Chapel. This is obvious from the very first words (1:1-4), whose design is consistent with the language set forth throughout the epistle. Does not one get the impression that the magnificent prose in what Lightfoot has called "the most beautifully constructed and expressive sentence in the New Testament"<sup>36</sup> is intended to express not only the general theme of the writing but its compositional genre as well? Is it not possible that the writer is attempting to declare, at the very opening of his work, that the momentous theme which he is setting forth requires a literary style unparalleled in its beauty and form?<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the opening words are not an exposition but an invitation, not the apex of the composition but the narthex of a great cathedral, whose grandeur and symmetry become apparent only to those of us who will enter and attentively linger within. Not in the forcing of the structure to the surface, but in the submersion of ourselves, is there hope for the future of investigation in this fascinating area.

<sup>36</sup>Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today*, 53.

<sup>37</sup>For a thorough syntactical, semantical, and rhetorical analysis of Heb 1:1-4, see D. A. Black, "Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis," forthcoming in *WTJ*.