

APOSTASY AS A MOTIF AND ITS EFFECT ON THE STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS

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The last two decades have seen a lively discussion over the literary structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Those who have been engaged in this discussion would agree with J. Swetnam that the arrangement "of independent factors into an intelligible pattern cannot be the result of chance but has to be the result of design."¹ Albert Vanhoye, referring to a "concentric design" in Hebrews, suggests that the ability to write according to such a design came quite naturally to the author, who, without giving thought to each detail, was spontaneously guided by his design.² Swetnam continues his discussion by saying that factors constituting the "intelligible pattern" indicate "the relation of the several parts of the writing to the whole and consequently influence the meaning of everything in the several parts and everything in the whole."³

Beyond the foregoing broad generalizations, however, agreement on the structure of Hebrews comes to an end. As a result, the message of Hebrews, which all agree is influenced by its structure, becomes the victim of a "structural push and shove." That is not to say that Hebrews' major themes are lost in the discussion. Jesus' divinity, his superiority to Moses and Aaron, the superiority of his priesthood over that of the Levitical system, the superiority of the new covenant over the old, etc., remain; but the fine nuances of the text that enrich our understanding of the major themes are often

¹J. Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 7-13," *Bib* 55 (1974): 346.

²Albert Vanhoye, "Discussions sur la structure de l'Épître aux Hébreux," *Bib* 55 (1974): 370.

³Swetnam, p. 346.

minimized by the structural divisions suggested by various authors. For this reason, Swetnam cautions that the "factors" going into an "intelligible pattern" that has resulted from the author's design must really be factors, and that they must "be understood as such by the addressees." Also, these factors must "point to an intelligible pattern which can be understood as such by the addressees."⁴

My remarks below provide, first, an overview of the current debate, and then a suggested outline for the Epistle to the Hebrews, based on structural considerations which have apparently been overlooked by earlier investigators.

1. *The Current Debate on Structure*

The opening salvo in the current discussion was fired by Albert Vanhoye in 1963 in his *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux*.⁵ Following the introduction of Hebrews (1:1-4) and prior to its conclusion (13:20-21), Vanhoye divides the epistle into five structural units: (1) 1:5-2:18, "Eschatology"; (2) 3:1-5:10, "Ecclesiology"; (3) 5:11-10:39, "Sacrifice"; (4) 11:1-12:13, "Ecclesiology"; and (5) 12:14-13:18, "Eschatology."

Vanhoye arrives at his divisions by watching for one or more literary devices which he calls "indices." He believes these indices can show where structural divisions may be made within the epistle. These indices are as follow: (1) "announcement of the subject" is found in the conclusion of one section and announces the subject of the next section; (2) "inclusions" consist of verbal relationships between the beginning and end of a literary unit; (3) "alteration of genres" in Hebrews is the movement, back and forth, between exposition and exhortation; (4) "characteristic words" are terms one would expect to find within a section dealing with a particular motif; and (5) "word hooks" are words used at the conclusion of one section and at the beginning of the next to connect the units of thought together.

The use of the terms "eschatology," "ecclesiology," and "sacrifice" help the reader to see that Vanhoye divides Hebrews into a chiasm:

⁴Ibid., pp. 346-347.

⁵Albert Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris, 1963).

- a. Introduction
- b. Eschatology
- c. Ecclesiology
- d. Sacrifice
- c'. Ecclesiology
- b'. Eschatology
- a'. Conclusion

John Bligh, not satisfied with Vanhoye's analysis of the structure of Hebrews, attempts a division of this book by a series of chiasms.⁶ Vanhoye's reaction to Bligh's effort is that he accomplishes nothing, because he ignores the literary "indices," as well as the development of thought within the epistle itself.⁷

R. Gyllenberg sees two major divisions in Hebrews, based on the themes of ἀρχηγός (1:1-4:16) and ἀρχιερεύς (5:1-12:29).⁸ These are criticized by Vanhoye as not corresponding to the text of the epistle.⁹ Jukka Thurén, a student of Gyllenberg, takes brief notice of Vanhoye's work, and declares that Vanhoye's analyses of the small sections of Hebrews are fruitful for interpretation, but that the same cannot be said of his analysis of the combined structure of the whole book. In his brief treatment of Vanhoye, Thurén compares Vanhoye's work on Hebrews with that of Gyllenberg, and favors Gyllenberg over Vanhoye.¹⁰

Vanhoye devotes a major portion of his subsequent article, "Discussions sur la structure de l'Épître aux Hébreux," to Thurén's criticisms. In this article, Vanhoye concludes that after unsatisfactory responses to his objections and after an incomplete critique of his positions, Thurén is not in a position "to play judge" between Gyllenberg and himself. Vanhoye says that it was clear from the beginning that Thurén was biased toward Gyllenberg.¹¹

⁶John Bligh, *Chiastic Analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Oxon, 1966).

⁷Vanhoye, "Discussions," p. 370.

⁸R. Gyllenberg, "Die Komposition des Hebräerbriefes," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok*, 22-23 (1957-1958): 137-147.

⁹Vanhoye, "Discussions," p. 364.

¹⁰Jukka Thurén, *Das Lobopfer der Hebräer: Studien zum Aufbau und Anliegen von Hebräerbrief 13*, Acta Academiae Aboensis, Ser. A, vol. 47/1 (Åbo, 1973), pp. 44-49.

¹¹Vanhoye, "Discussions," pp. 364-365.

Swetnam, in evaluating Vanhoye's work, declares that the structure of Hebrews is worthy of attention, but he sees a danger in separating formal structure from content. This procedure, he feels, can only lead to a distortion of content; and if the discovery of form is pursued independent of content, "it can well result in error as to the form."¹² Vanhoye responded that Swetnam's suggestion of his establishing his structure at the expense of content "is absolutely not the case."¹³

Swetnam's discussion continues with the observations that the announcement of subjects, the genres of exposition and exhortation, and the length of a division are the criteria for structure "because they are intrinsically linked with content in the form of judgments," and that "hook words," "characteristic words," and "inclusion" play a subsidiary role. Content, above all, he states, must be included in any formulation of structure.¹⁴

In response to Swetnam, Vanhoye insists that all five of his literary indices be given priority.¹⁵ However, he does recognize that they will not receive exclusive priority, because, for example, the announcement of the subject will, by its very nature, take into account the context. This is also true of inclusions. However, without his literary indices, though one may reconstruct the form coherently, it will be done in an inexact manner.¹⁶ Therefore, Vanhoye concludes that Swetnam's suggestions are those of opinion, not of scientific demonstration.¹⁷ And so the dialogue goes on.¹⁸

¹²J. Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 1-6," *Bib* 53 (1972): 369.

¹³Vanhoye, "Discussions," p. 369.

¹⁴Swetnam, "Hebrews 7-13," pp. 333, 334.

¹⁵Vanhoye, "Discussions," p. 369.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 373.

¹⁸For further discussion, see P. Auffret, "Essai sur la structure littéraire et l'interprétation d'Hébreux 3,1-6," *NTS* 26 (1980): 380-396; P. Auffret, "Note sur la structure littéraire d'Hb ii. 1-4," *NTS* 25 (1979): 166-179; M. Gourgues, "Remarques sur la 'structure centrale' de l'épître aux Hébreux—À l'occasion d'une réédition," *RB* 84 (1977): 26-37; E. B. Horning, "Chiasmus, Creedal Structure, and Christology in Hebrews 12:1-2," *BR* 23 (1978): 37-48; D. W. B. Robinson, "The Literary Structure of Hebrews 1:1-4," *AJBA* 2 (1972): 178-186; A. Vanhoye, "La question littéraire de Hébreux xiii. 1-6," *NTS* 23 (1977): 121-139; and A. Vanhoye, "Literarische Struktur und theologische Botschaft des Hebräerbriefs," *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 4 (1979): 119-147.

2. *A Suggested Structure for the Epistle*

At the risk of becoming a contributor to the "structural push and shove," I wish to suggest a division of Hebrews which, to my knowledge, has not yet been proposed. Although Vanhoye's indices may be employed usefully within the subdivisions, and though chiasms may be identified throughout the text, the overall structure of this epistle appears to be based on content. Stanley D. Toussaint presents a convincing argument that the eschatology of the five warning passages in Hebrews "is a determinative factor in coming to the conclusion that the passages in question are concerned with the danger of apostasy." He goes on to point out:

There were some in the readership who had made a profession of faith in Christ but were seriously considering returning to Judaism. It was not a case of the Galatian heresy where some were attempting to unite Christianity with Judaism; on the contrary, these people were about to abandon Christianity to slip back to the works system of Judaism.¹⁹

I would like to suggest that the "concern with the danger of apostasy" lies not only behind the five warning passages (exhortations), but also behind the exposition in this epistle. With apostasy as the central concern of the entire epistle, Hebrews may be divided into five sections, exclusive of introduction (1:1-4), pastoral exhortation (13:1-19), and conclusion (13:20-25). Each section is subdivided into three parts: (1) theological exposé, (2) warning, and (3) statement of judgment.

Each theological exposé is a tightly knit piece of logic as to why the forsaking of Jesus is unthinkable. He is superior to angels, Moses, and Aaron; his priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood; and his blood alone brings purification from sin. Forsake him, and where does one go to find eternal salvation? There is nowhere to go! Jesus and what he offers—this is superior to all else.

Each exposé is followed by a warning not to forsake the only one who is capable of purging the conscience. This, in turn, is

¹⁹Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982): 67-80.

followed by a statement of judgment against those who apostatize, disregarding who Jesus is and what he does for those who accept him. Thus, we have the following five divisions of Hebrews, with their respective three subdivisions.

I. —1:5-2:4

Theological Exposé—1:5-14. Jesus is the Son of God, elevated to God's right hand, and thus superior to angels.

Warning—2:1. Do not let slip what has been heard and thus drift away from it.

Judgment—2:2-4. If disobedience to the message declared by angels received just retribution, how shall one escape who neglects the salvation provided by him who is greater than angels?

II. —2:5-4:13

Theological Exposé—2:5-3:6. Jesus is made like his brethren so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest. As high priest, he is faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful. Yet, Jesus is greater than Moses.

Warning—3:7-19. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart as in the rebellion.

Judgment—4:1-13. Fear, lest you be judged to have failed to enter God's rest. God's word is sharper than a two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

III. —4:14-6:8

Theological Exposé—4:14-5:10. Jesus is the great high priest, designated by God as a priest after the order of Melchizedek. He is able to sympathize with the weakness of humanity; therefore, sinners are to draw near to the throne of grace with confidence.

Warning—5:11-6:6. The Hebrew Christians are dull of hearing, not being able to tolerate solid food. It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who commit apostasy.

Judgment—6:7-8. As the thorns and thistles of worthless land are burned, so judgment awaits those who crucify the Son of God and hold him up to contempt by apostasy.

IV. —6:9-10:39

Theological Exposé—6:9-10:25. God will fulfill the covenant promises made to Abraham and his descendants through Jesus, who is a priest after the order of Melchizedek and mediator of the new covenant; as high priest, Jesus mediates the efficacy of his blood in the heavenly sanctuary.

Warning—10:26-27. If those who once professed Jesus sin deliberately, there remains no longer a sacrifice for sins, but only judgment and a fury of fire.

Judgment—10:28-31. As a man who violated Moses' law died without mercy at the hands of two or three witnesses, so he who forsakes Jesus will stand condemned to die on the basis of three facts that bear witness against him: (1) he has spurned the Son of God, (2) he has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and (3) he has outraged the Spirit of grace.

Secondary Warning and Judgment—10:32-39. Hebrews 10 has a secondary warning and a secondary statement of judgment: "Do not throw away your confidence" (vs. 35), and "For yet a little while, and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry" (vs. 37).

V. —11:1-12:29

Theological Exposé—11:1-40. The great men of faith have not yet received the fulfillment of the promises. They wait for the Hebrew Christians, so all may be made perfect together.

Warning—12:1-24. This is a long passage mixed with various warnings, e.g., "Do not despise the chastening of the Lord" (vss. 5, 6); and exhortations, e.g., "Lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees" (vs. 12).

Judgment—12:25-29. As those who were disobedient in ancient Israel did not escape him who warned them on earth, much less shall those who are disobedient now escape him who warns from heaven. God's voice will shake earth and heaven to remove all who are not obedient, so that only those who cannot be shaken will remain.

3. Conclusion

Although Vanhoye's "indices" may be helpful in working within the smaller units of Hebrews, it would appear that Swetnam's position is sound. The broad structure of Hebrews rests upon the divisions indicated by content and ideas. The overriding concern about apostasy underlies the five theological exposés and the stern warnings and strong statements of judgment at the conclusion of those exposés.