

## SESSION FOUR

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

### I. TRADITIONAL APPROACH

#### A. The Question of Genre [see Stanley, 247-51 for a more detailed discussion]

A preliminary question to the issue of structure is the matter of what genre the Book of Hebrews belongs to. Undoubtedly this is an epistle, but is this typical *epistolary genre*? It certainly does not have the clear bifurcation that we have seen in Paul's epistle to the Romans or to the Ephesians, i.e., a clear-cut doctrinal section followed by a clear-cut "practical" section. In light of the author's urging of his readers in 13:22 to bear with this "word of exhortation" (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως), we must take into consideration that this is as much a homily as it is an epistle.

#### B. Traditional Approach Described

The traditional approach to understanding the book has been to see it as consisting of two primary parts, a doctrinal part (1:1–10:18) followed by a paraenetic or exhortative part (10:19–13:25).<sup>1</sup>

#### C. Traditional Approach Evaluated

The problem with the traditional approach is that it fails to do justice to the unique literary genre, for the Book of Hebrews is probably more "homily" than *epistolary*. The *exhortative* nature of the book highlighted in 13:22 is found to pervade the book as a whole. Hence, there is as much exhortation and warnings prior to 10:19 as there is following. Recognition of this careful interweaving of teaching and exhortation throughout the book demands a more sophisticated understanding of the book's structure.

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<sup>1</sup>An example of the traditional approach can be found with John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews* (New York: Carter and Brothers, 1862). More recently, Homer Kent (1972), Edmond Hiebert (1977), and Donald Guthrie (1983) follow this general approach. Alexander Nairne, writing in the early part of this century had a slightly varied scheme. He saw the argumentative core (5:1–10:18) enclosed by a prelude (1:1–4:16) and an exhortation (10:19–13:25) (*The Epistle of Priesthood: Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913], 301). For Westcott, the theme of the epistle was 'the finality of Christianity.' Following four didactic sections, the author presented one admonitory section (Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, xlviiii-xlix).

## II. THE CONTRIBUTION OF ALBERT VANHOYE

### A. Introduction

Albert Vanhoye was a French Jesuit scholar who argued for a very careful structure of the book based on several literary criteria.<sup>2</sup> His methodology could be referred to as "structuralizing techniques of composition."

### B. Explanation of Vanhoye

Vanhoye's theory is based on several literary criteria he claims to observe within the book of Hebrews.<sup>3</sup> The following list of examples will serve to illustrate Vanhoye's method.

#### 1. Announcements or Signpost Passages

This first literary technique is of paramount importance for Vanhoye and influences his results more than any other factor. An "announcement" or "signpost passage" occurs at or near the end of a major section of the book and introduces topics that will be presented and developed in the following section. For instance, Vanhoye views 10:36-39 as the conclusion to a major section running from 5:11–10:39. Yet in the final verses, two topics are mentioned which become primary themes in the following section 11:1–12:13. In 10:36 *endurance* is mentioned ("you have need of endurance"), and in 10:39 *faith* is mentioned ("we are . . . of those who have faith"). The latter is taken up and developed in 11:1-40, whereas the former is taken up and developed in 12:1-13.

#### 2. Inclusio

Certain sections of the book are demarcated by the presence of an inclusio. An example would be Heb 1:5-14. The section is initiated in 1:5 by the question "For to which of the angels did He ever say," and comes to its conclusion in 1:13 with the question "But to which of the angels has He ever said."

#### 3. Hook Words

In this case, words at the end of one unit are used in the beginning of the next unit (similar to number one but not as much a pervasive theme). An example is seen with Heb 12:24 where we see the statement "the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel." This is followed in 12:25 by the exhortation, "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking."

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<sup>2</sup>Albert Vanhoye, *La Structure Littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1963). An English work presenting his main conclusions is available in *A Structured Translation of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. James Swetnam (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964). Vanhoye's work was a refinement of an earlier French work by L. Vaganay ("Le plan de l'Épître aux Hébreux," in *Mémorial Lagrange* [Paris: Gabalda, 1940]).

<sup>3</sup>For a helpful summary of Vanhoye's method, see David Alan Black, "The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and A Proposal," *Grace Theological Journal* 7:2 (Fall 1986): 168-173; and David J. MacLeod, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146:582 (Apr-Jun 1989): 186-193.

## 4. Characteristic Terms

In this case, a term or concept is pervasive to an entire unit. An example would be the term "faith" in Hebrews 11 which sets that chapter off as a distinct literary unit.

## 5. Alternation of Literary Genre

This involves the movement back and forth between exposition and paraenesis (exhortation or call for action), and the attempt to define and label each section of the book accordingly.

## C. The Results of Vanhoye's Methodology

Based on these literary criteria, Vanhoye came up with the following scheme of organization for the book:

		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
		5:11–6:20	(Preliminary Exhortation)
	A	7:1-28	According to the Order of Melchizedek
III	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

### III. THE INFLUENCE OF VANHOYE

The approach taken by Vanhoye set a new standard for studies on the Book of Hebrews, based on what could be regarded as a "scientific approach." Though not without his critics, Vanhoye has had a significant influence on several of the major commentaries of the past decade. Two noteworthy commentaries that have recently appeared reflect an indebtedness to Vanhoye. William Lane, in his monumental two volume commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series, writes, "I am

eager to acknowledge my own reliance upon the work of Vanhoye, even when the analysis of the literary structure that I propose differs from his own."<sup>4</sup> More recently, Ellingworth in the New International Greek Testament Commentary states that his commentary "generally follows the divisions established by Vanhoye."<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce's revised commentary of 1990, on the other hand, is not strong on formal structure (mostly topical with little concern for structure) and shows virtually no interaction with Vanhoye in this area.

#### IV. PROBLEMS WITH VANHOYE'S THEORY <sup>6</sup>

The fact that Vanhoye's methodology yields a neatly organized chiasmic structure may seem at first sight to lend credence to his theory. Despite the influence that Vanhoye has had upon the modern study of Hebrews, there are problems with his approach that need to be acknowledged and taken into consideration. Some suspicion should have been aroused by the fact that he chose to view 13:19 and 13:22-25 as later additions to the book (they did not fit his chiasmic scheme).

- A. In his labeling of the alternating literary genres of the book (exposition and paraenesis), Vanhoye labeled 2:5–5:10 as *exposition*. However, this material contains a significant and lengthy paraenesis in chapters three and four. As many have acknowledged, it can be quite subjective in attempting to sort out the expositional sections from the paraenetic ones.<sup>7</sup>
- B. In his second major section (3:1–5:10), Vanhoye divided this into two parts, the first in 3:1–4:14 and the second in 4:15–5:10. Yet it seems very difficult to separate 4:14 from 4:15, as the closing verses of chapter four (4:14-16) form a sub-unit wrapping up what was announced in 2:17-18. Some will link 4:14-16 with the preceding material (so Ellingworth), and others with the following material in 5:1-10, but it is very doubtful that 4:14-16 should be subdivided (Lane, nevertheless, follows Vanhoye in this suggestion).

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<sup>4</sup>William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), lxxxvii.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993), 58.

<sup>6</sup>For a brief evaluation and criticism of Vanhoye, see MacLeod, 191-193. A more thorough evaluation is provided by James Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 1-6," *Biblica* 53 (1972): 368-85; and "Form and Content in Hebrews 7-13," *Biblica* 55 (1974): 333-48.

<sup>7</sup>One of the most detailed attempts to separate doctrine from paraenesis is the study by K. L. Maxwell, "Doctrine and Parenesis in the Epistle to the Hebrews, with special reference to pre-Christian Gnosticism," Ph.D. diss., Yale, 1953. The results of his study are conveniently summarized in Ellingworth, page 58.

- C. Vanhoye's idea that 8:1–9:28 forms a chiasmus is doubtful. His scheme:
- a* The old worship, earthly and figurative (8:1-6)
  - b* The first covenant, imperfect and provisional (8:7-13)
    - c* The old and powerless institutions of worship (9:1-10)
    - c'* The new, efficacious institutions (9:11-14)
  - b'* The new covenant (9:15-23)
  - a'* The entrance to heaven (9:24-28)

His labeling of 9:24-28 as "The entrance to heaven" seems a bit forced. This section seems to be just as much concerned with the "once for all" aspect of Christ's work as with the heavenly nature of His sacrifice. Steve Stanley, in contrast, has argued quite persuasively that chapters 8 through 10 are a unit by virtue of several structural clues within this section.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it would be difficult to separate chapter 10 from chapter 9, for 9:23–10:18 seems to form a sub-section of these chapters in which the author compares the sacrifices of the Old Covenant with that of Christ's under the new.

- D. Vanhoye's suggestion that 5:9-10 constitutes a "signpost passage" announcing the upcoming themes of chapters 7:1–10:18 is doubtful. If Vanhoye's idea is correct, then he can make a case that 7:1–10:18 forms a major unit consisting of three divisions, but this has been called into question by Stanley.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Vanhoye understands the reference "having been made perfect" in 5:9 as an *announcement* of 8:1–9:28, and "the source of eternal salvation" in 5:9 as an *announcement* of 10:1-18. Stanley points out, however, that the former ("made perfect") probably refers to what has gone before, and that the latter could just as well refer to all of what would be presented in chapters 8–10.

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<sup>8</sup>Steve Stanley, "The Structure of Hebrews from Three Perspectives," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45:2 (1994): 260. He writes,

"First, these chapters include one longer section of theological discourse and one shorter section of paraenesis, both of which use a form of ἔχω at or near the beginning. Further investigation reveals that there are several words in the first sentence of the theological part that correspond to words in the first sentence of the paraenetic part: ἔχομεν--ἔχοντες, ἀρχιεπεία--ἱερέα, ἀγίων--ἀγίων, σκηνηῆς--οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἀληθινῆς--ἀληθινῆς. This list of words or similar words common to the first sentences of these two parts may indicate a structural connection, that is, that the paraenetic part (10:19-39) should be seen as connected to the doctrinal part (8:1–10:18). Secondly, the repetition of parts of Jeremiah 31 in chapters 8 and 10 serves to bind the doctrinal part of these chapters together with an *inclusio*. Thirdly, understanding 8:1–10:25 as forming a cycle of exempla (8:1–10:18), conclusion (10:19-21) and exhortation (10:22-25) indicates that these chapters must be a unit. Fourthly, fourteen of the seventeen occurrences of διαθήκη in Hebrews occur in chapters 8–10, making it a characteristic word in this section. Fifthly, the word 'faith' serves as a hook word in 10:39 and 11:1, marking out a structural seam, just as the word 'Melchizedek' serves as a hook word in 6:20 and 7:1 and has a similar function."

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 259.

- E. MacLeod has pointed out a problem with the titles used by Vanhoye. "The titles assigned to the sections do not reflect the development of the author's thought, that is, they do not indicate the direction the argument is taking."<sup>10</sup>
- F. Corresponding to the five main sections of his chiasmic structure, Vanhoye attempted to label these as being *eschatology*, *ecclesiology* and *sacrifice*. For instance, the outer sections (1:5–2:18 and 12:14–13:18) are considered *eschatology*. The inner sections (3:1–5:10 and 11:1–12:13) are considered *ecclesiology*. The innermost section is labeled *sacrifice*. This seems a bit forced, since there are eschatological elements in other portions of the book than in 1:5–2:18 and 12:14–13:18.
- G. Finally, there is the matter of interpreting the literary features that one seems to identify and whether or not these actually *determine structure*. Stanley states,
- ". . . it is important to bear in mind that the 'techniques' Vanhoye defines as structural clues can also be used as literary devices which have nothing to do with the structure of the composition. Therefore, some judgement must be made as to whether any given device is intended as a structural marker or is simply there for persuasive effect."<sup>11</sup>

## V. OTHER LITERARY FEATURES TO BE CONSIDERED

Though Vanhoye's theory may need criticism and careful evaluation, he is certainly to be commended for putting structural studies on a good course. In addition to the literary techniques that Vanhoye has highlighted, there are other features that ought to be taken into consideration as well. MacLeod (193ff.) has called attention to these.

- A. Use of comparatives ("more excellent," "better," "greater," etc.)
- B. Terms denoting finality ("new," "once," "perfect," "eternal/forever," etc.)
- C. *A fortiori* arguments  
This involves a conclusion that follows with even greater logical necessity than another already accepted in the argument (see 2:1-3; 9:13-14; 10:28-29; 12:9,25).
- D. Formal contrast  
Adversative particles (e.g., μέν . . . δέ) are used to point out contrasts between individuals, institutions, covenants, sacrifices, etc.
- E. Repeated themes (e.g., high priest, holding fast, etc.)  
These are woven throughout rather than being confined to one section.
- F. Topic sentences

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<sup>10</sup>MacLeod, 191-92.

<sup>11</sup>Stanley, 257.

This is similar to Vanhoye's "signpost passages," but in this case involves lead sentences for major sections. MacLeod notes, "Stine has argued that the epistle falls into three sections: 1:1–7:28; 8:1–10:18; and 10:19–13:25. He noted that each is introduced by a topic sentence: 1:1-4; 8:1-2; and 10:19-25."<sup>12</sup>

## VI. FACTORS INFLUENCING MY CONCLUSIONS

- A. Although formal literary techniques must be taken into consideration, due attention must also be given to thematic concerns (this is a weakness to Vanhoye's work, a point that Swetnam has been careful to make). We must not divorce literary principles from content!
- B. The matter of the *New Covenant* is not just a concern of one section of the book, but is the prevailing thought of the author throughout.
- C. There does seem to be some validity to seeing the "announcement" of certain themes or topics at the *seams* of the epistle. However, we need to be careful and give ample evaluation of this. On the one hand, we may have "signpost passages" at the end of one section which alert us to the upcoming topics of the next section (so Vanhoye). But on the other hand, we may also have "topic sentences" at the onset of a major section that set forth the prevailing topics of that section (so Stine). We may even have a verse (or verses) that point backward to what has just been covered *as well as* looking forward to the next topic of discussion (2:17-18?; 4:14-16; 10:19-39). Furthermore, we may have combinations of these techniques (is there uniformity or flexibility?).
- D. There are several good arguments that can be made in defense of the thesis that 8:1–10:39 is a distinctive unit, as Stanley (260) has argued (contra Vanhoye). See footnote #8 above.
- E. In light of 13:22 ("word of exhortation"), due attention must be given to the *primary* exhortation/warning sections of the book (even though these are carefully interwoven with doctrinal material). These are 2:1-4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:20; 10:19-39; and 12:14-29. Stanley offers wise counsel:

"In the light of this, it would be misguided to look for the climax of Hebrews in its doctrinal parts, and equally questionable to describe the message of the book without highlighting its paraenetic focus. In Hebrews we find a sophisticated view of the Christian faith: it is at one and the same time to be rooted in an informed understanding of theology, and reflected in a unique lifestyle of fidelity. To understand the message of Hebrews, then, it is important to recognize that all of its theologizing serves the purpose of providing a firm basis for its exhortation, which is the point of the book."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>MacLeod, 195. Cf. Donald Medford Stine, "The Finality of the Christian Faith: A Study of the Unfolding Argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapters 1–7," Th.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964.

<sup>13</sup>Stanley, 251.

Likewise, Barnabas Lindars makes an excellent point about this, which is summarized by Walters:

"He [Lindars] rightly argues that the climax of the argument is not to be found in the treatment of the high priesthood of Christ, or of his sacrifice, but in the following section on faith (and its response). The author is not concerned to garner assent for his novel doctrinal presentations; rather, his aim is to persuade a dissident faction of Christians in a certain locale to change their behavior to be in conformity with their original confession of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the final chapters of the book must not be treated as some sort of appendage (secondary to the theological elaborations). Rather, the final three chapters drive his argument home (and his pastoral concerns for them). By faith, they must keep their eyes on Jesus and go forth to Him outside the camp.

F. We must seek to understand the relationship of OT quotations to the development of the book.

1. Ps 95 clearly extends over the chapter break at 4:1 and thus unites chapters 3 and 4.
2. The quotation and allusion of Ps 110 within the book signals that this is the most pervasive thought for the author (see Stanley, 251-254). This occurs in every major section of the book, thus reflecting that this one quotation is far more significant than all others. Stanley summarizes this observation,

"The first seven chapters of Hebrews are all about the connection of Jesus the Sovereign Lord as portrayed in Psalm 110:1 with his role as priest as described in Psalm 110:4 and the significance of Jesus filling this dual role. The next three chapters explore the theological implications of Christ's priesthood, focusing on his once-for-all sacrifice, while the last three chapters deal with the motivational and practical implications of his priesthood."<sup>15</sup>

3. For most every major section of the book, the author is drawing upon some OT quotation for the source of his argument, explaining the relationship to the person and work of Christ, and then pointing out the implications for the audience.<sup>16</sup> The primary links are:

Heb 1:1–2:4      Catena highlighting Ps 2 and 110:1

Heb 2:5-18      Ps 8:4-6

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<sup>14</sup>John R. Walters, "The Rhetorical Argument of Hebrews," *The Asbury Theological Seminary* 51:2 (Fall 1996): 59-70; for B. Lindars, see "The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 382-406.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>16</sup>For a helpful analysis of the role that the OT quotations play, see Ronald E. Clements, "The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28:1 (Fall 1985): 36-45. Walters's work (see p 66) is very reliant upon the identification of OT quotations, though his conclusions on the overall structure differ somewhat from my own.

Heb 3:1–4:13	Ps 95:7-11
Heb 5:1–7:28	Ps 110:4
Heb 8:1–10:18	Jer 31:31-34 and Ps 40:6-8
Heb 10:19-39	Hab 2:4
Heb 12:1ff.	Prov 3:11-12
Heb 12:18-29	Ex 19

4. We should observe the role of comparatives, terms denoting finality, *a fortiori* arguments and adversative particles which highlight that the overall thrust of the author's argument is that the priesthood, covenant, and sacrifice of Christ are superior to the priesthood, covenant and sacrifices of the Old Covenant.
5. The section 10:19-39 should be considered as a unit in light of the similar elements in 10:23 ("let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful") and 10:35 ("Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward").