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The literary structure of Hebrews is uniquely complex and elusive. As recently as 1987, D. E. Aune stated categorically, “The structure of Hebrews remains an unsolved problem” (*The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 213). As D. A. Black has observed, if the writer had a carefully planned structure in mind for the development of the discourse, his arrangement is not easily perceived by those who have made Hebrews an object of intensive study (*GTJ* 7 [1986] 164).

EARLY SUGGESTIVE APPROACHES

Advances in the quest for the literary structure of Hebrews have been made through the combined efforts of several scholars, each approaching the discourse from a particular vantage point. F. Büchsel, for example, called attention to the importance of genre differentiation, as the writer alternates between exposition and exhortation (*RGZ* 2:1669–73). His insight has been sharpened by R. Gyllenberg (*SEÅ* 22–23 [1957–58] 137–47) and remains a significant clue in the detection of the literary structure of Hebrews.

Significant verbal clues supplied by the writer have been observed by those who have employed literary analysis in their approach to the text of Hebrews.

Near the turn of the century F. Thien recognized that the writer announces his primary themes just prior to the introduction of the unit in which they are to be developed *in inverse order* (RB 11 [1902] 74-86). Accordingly, in Heb 2:17 Jesus is designated a "merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God." In 3:1-5:10 the writer directs attention to Jesus as "faithful" (3:1-4:13) and then to Jesus as "merciful" (4:14-5:10). This procedure is repeated in 7:1-10:39. In 5:9-10 Jesus is described as "the source of an eternal salvation" and as "a priest like Melchizedek." Following a hortatory introduction to the next major division (5:11-6:20), the writer develops the notion of Jesus as a priest like Melchizedek (7:1-28) before developing the theme of Jesus as the source of an eternal salvation (8:1-10:18). In 10:36-39 the writer announces the themes to be developed in 11:1-12:29, namely, endurance (10:36) and faith (10:38-39). Thien considered 1:1-14 the introduction to the discourse and 13:1-25 its conclusion.

Thien's proposals were taken up and developed in 1940 by L. Vaganay, whose significant article, "Le Plan de l'Épître aux Hébreux" (269-77), has been heralded as the beginning of the modern discussion of the literary structure of Hebrews (Michel, 29; H. Feld, 23-25; G. H. Guthrie, "The Structure of Hebrews," 21). Focusing on the problem of the distribution of the units of discourse in Hebrews, Vaganay advanced the discussion of the structure of the document with his recognition of "hook-words" (*mot-crochets*) throughout the composition. Hook-words were a rhetorical device developed in antiquity to tie together two blocks of material (cf. Michel, 29-31). The introduction of a key word at the end of one section and its repetition at the beginning of the next served to mark formally the transition between the two units. The process is sustained throughout Hebrews, tying each section of discourse to the one that follows (Vaganay, "Le Plan," 271-72).

Basing his analysis of structure on the writer's use of such rhetorical devices, Vaganay was able to offer an outline of Hebrews that was thematically symmetrical:

Introduction (1:1-4)

First Theme in Only One Section: Jesus Superior to the Angels (1:5-2:18)

Second Theme in Two Sections: Jesus, Compassionate and Faithful High Priest (3:1-5:10)

§1: Jesus, faithful high priest (3:1-4:16)

§2: Jesus, compassionate high priest (5:1-10)

Third Theme in Three Sections: Jesus, Source of Eternal Salvation, Perfected Priest, High Priest like Melchizedek (5:11-10:39)

Exhortation (5:11-6:20)

§1: Jesus, high priest like Melchizedek (7:1-28)

§2: Jesus, perfected priest (8:1-9:28)

§3: Jesus, source of an eternal salvation (10:1-39)

Fourth Theme in Two Sections: Perseverance in the Faith (11:1-12:13)

§1: Faith (11:1-12:2)

§2: Perseverance (12:3-13)

Fifth Theme in Only One Section: The Need to be Holy (12:14-13:21)

Conclusion: Final Recommendations (13:22-25)

Vaganay's article remains a milestone in the structural assessment of Hebrews.

A different approach to identifying the literary structure of Hebrews was proposed in 1954 by A. Descamps, who called attention to the writer's conscious use of "characteristic terms" (*RDT* 9 [1954] 251–58, 333–38). The expression "characteristic terms" refers to the concentration of key vocabulary or of cognate terms within a section of discourse that serves to articulate and develop a primary theme. Descamps observed, for example, that the writer introduced the term "angels" eleven times in 1:5 to 2:16, and only twice after that point in the remainder of the discourse. The density of the concentration of this "characteristic term" serves to identify the thematic limits of a block of material. It extends from 1:5 to 2:16, together with the thematic announcement of the subject of the following section in 2:17–18. The use of "characteristic words" is a literary device by which the writer builds semantic cohesion into the several sections of the discourse.

THE SYNTHETIC APPROACH OF A. VANHOYE

A. Vanhoye became the heir to all of these suggestive approaches to uncovering the literary structure of Hebrews. In a landmark monograph published in 1963 entitled *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (2nd rev. ed., 1976), Vanhoye synthesized the insights of F. Thien, R. Gyllenberg, A. Descamps, and especially L. Vaganay with his own meticulous research on the literary structure of Hebrews. He identified five literary devices employed by the writer to indicate formally the opening and closing of unified sections throughout the discourse: (1) the announcement of the subject; (2) transitional hook-words; (3) change of genre; (4) characteristic terms; and (5) *inclusio*, i.e., the bracketing of a unit of discourse by the repetition of a striking expression or key word at the beginning and close of a section. The presence of these literary devices provided an objective means for determining the beginning and end of a unit of discourse. Vanhoye also stressed the importance of symmetrical structures in the construction of the discourse as a whole and in the subsections of which it was composed.

In the lively debate that followed the publication of Vanhoye's monograph, he has proven to be an indefatigable conversation-partner. He has shown an openness to modify details of his proposal but remains convinced of its essential correctness (see especially *Bib* 55 [1974] 349–80, and *SNTU* 4 [1979] 133–41; for a useful summary of Vanhoye's approach to the structure of Hebrews in English, see Black, *GTJ* 7 [1986] 168–73, and for an appreciation for Vanhoye's rigorous research, 173–76).

Although Vanhoye's synthetic approach to the literary structure of Hebrews has not escaped criticism (see, e.g., T. C. G. Thorton's review of Vanhoye's monograph in *JTS* n.s. 15 [1964] 137–41; Bligh, *HeyJ* 5 [1964] 170–77; Swetnam, *Bib* 53 [1964] 368–85, and id., *Bib* 55 [1974] 333–48; Zimmermann, *Bekennntnis*, 20–22), it remains influential and significant (cf. Black, *GTJ* 7 [1986] 168–76; Attridge, 16–27). 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. The detail of Vanhoye's mature reflections on the literary structure of Hebrews is consistently reviewed in the *Introduction* to each of the five main divisions of the discourse (1:1–2:18; 3:1–5:10; 5:11–10:39; 11:1–12:13;

12:14–13:21) and in the *Form/Structure/Setting* section for each of the constituent units of the discourse.

THE TRIPARTITE SCHEME OF W. NAUCK

Those who have been less convinced of the value of Vanhoye's proposals have tended to align themselves with the modified tripartite scheme advanced in 1960 by W. Nauck ("Zum Aufbau des Hebräerbriefes," 199–206). Nauck dialogued with the current proposals concerning the structure of Hebrews advanced in the influential commentaries of C. Spicq and O. Michel (5th ed.). He found himself attracted to the tripartite scheme championed by Michel, who found points of division in Hebrews after 4:13 and 10:18. The strength of this approach was that it recognized the organization of Hebrews in terms of the primacy of parenesis (Nauck, "Zum Aufbau," 201–3). Nauck noted that hortatory blocks of material are assigned the dominant role in framing structurally the three major divisions of Hebrews. He proposed that 1:1–4:13 be seen as an integrated unit framed by the logos-hymn in 1:2b–3 at the opening and the sophia-hymn in 4:12–13 at the close of the division. He then modified Michel's proposal concerning the central division, extending it from 4:14–10:18 to 4:14–10:31. He contended that the writer of Hebrews marked the central division of the discourse with strikingly parallel formulations at the beginning (4:14–16) and at the end (10:19–23) and that this indicated that there could not be a divisional break at 10:18. The final division (10:32–13:17), he argued, begins and ends with a similar type of exhortation. On this reading, Hebrews is a discourse composed of three major divisions, each identifiable by the presence of parallel passages at the opening and closing of the divisions ("Zum Aufbau," 200–203). Nauck's proposal has been accepted by O. Michel (in the sixth and subsequent editions of his commentary, 29–35) and by others (e.g., W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. [Nashville: Abingdon, 1975] 390; Zimmermann, *Bekenntnis*, 18–24; on the importance of the parallelism between 4:14–16 and 10:19–23 observed by Nauck, see G. H. Guthrie, "The Structure of Hebrews," 59–60, 74).

THE ABSENCE OF A CONSENSUS

There is at the present time no consensus regarding the literary structure of Hebrews. The extent of the disparity in current proposals concerning the structure of Hebrews has been charted suggestively by G. H. Guthrie ("The Structure of Hebrews," 37; D. Guthrie's analysis is set forth in his *New Testament Introduction*⁴, 728–33; the approaches of Spicq, Michel, Attridge, and F. F. Bruce, respectively, are based on their commentaries; this chart is reproduced by permission; see Fig. 1).

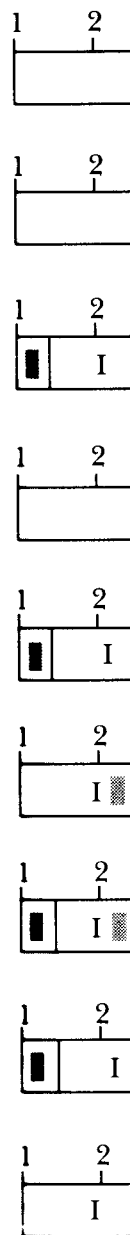


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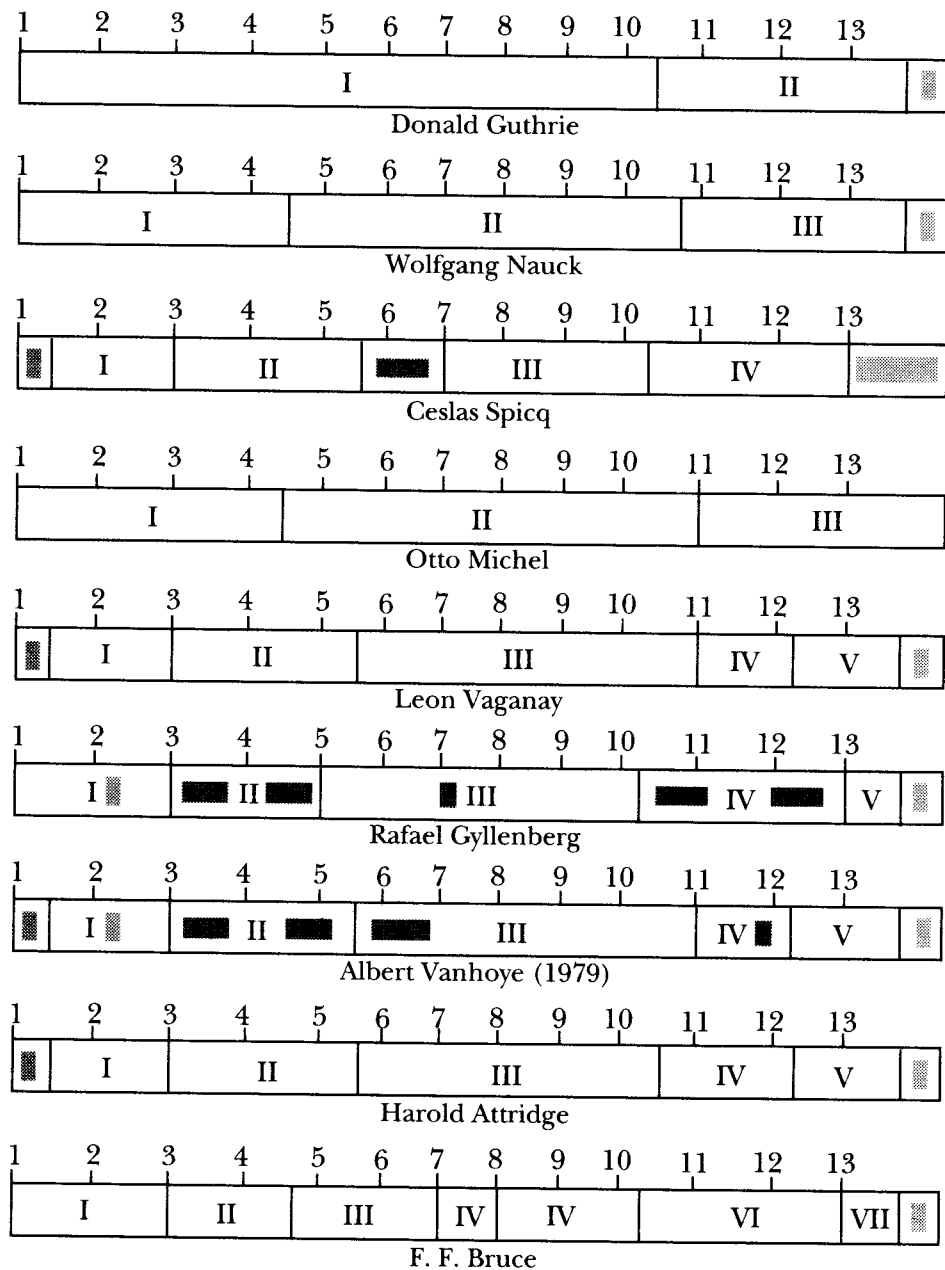


Fig. 1. Proposals regarding literary structure of Hebrews as charted by G. H. Guthrie.

Approaches to structural divisions of Hebrews: 1, 2, 3, etc. = chapter divisions; I, II, III, etc. = primary sections; ■ = the introduction (when the introduction is emphasized in the outline; ■ = the appendix or conclusion; ■ = hortatory material (when it is emphasized as a strategic factor in the outline).

There are multiple reasons for the absence of a consensus concerning the literary structure of Hebrews. Critical decisions concerning sectional boundary limits and the identification of the transitional devices employed consciously or subconsciously by the writer are rooted in methodology. My own wrestling with methodological issues will be reflected in this commentary in the *Form/Structure/Setting* sections, especially in the determination of boundary limits in 3:1-4:14; 4:15-5:10; 12:14-29; and 13:1-25, and in the *Introduction* to the final division, 12:14-13:25.

Factors inherent in the discourse make a confident decision concerning literary structure difficult to attain. The unusual alternation and intermingling of exposition and exhortation are problematical when seeking to assess the literary structure of Hebrews, as Michel recognized (26-28). The writer's "style of delivery," introducing a tantalizingly brief reference (e.g., 1:3, "After having made purification for sins"), but deferring its development to a much later point in the discourse (9:11-10:18), creates genuine difficulties for structural analysis. Topics are foreshadowed and repeated. An adequate approach to the structure of Hebrews must be able to assess the use of repetition of thought and reprises. It must be able to account for the weaving in and out of motifs and themes throughout the discourse like threads in an intricately woven tapestry.

The range of proposals concerning the structure of Hebrews attests the artistic and literary complexity of this discourse. In the quest for the demarcation of formal divisions in Hebrews, two considerations remain paramount. First, there were in antiquity literary and rhetorical conventions for the arrangement of material in an orderly fashion. It can be expected that the writer observed these conventions. Secondly, the reduction of the discourse to writing demanded the provision of verbal clues to assist the audience in following the unfolding of the argument. The explicit use of transitional devices to signal a defined turning point in an argument was essential to a discourse that would be heard and comprehended aurally. In spite of its elusiveness, the quest for the literary structure of Hebrews is legitimate. In the pursuit of that quest, in this commentary literary, rhetorical, conceptual, and semantic analyses have been employed.

ADDENDUM: THE TEXT-LINGUISTIC APPROACH OF G. H. GUTHRIE

With the aid of the relatively new discipline of discourse analysis or text linguistics (see above, "Discourse Analysis"), G. H. Guthrie has taken up the question of the structure of Hebrews from a fresh perspective in his 1991 dissertation, "The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-linguistic Analysis" (for Guthrie's method, see "Discourse Analysis" above). Although I did not enjoy access to his research until after the completion of the commentary, his approach is impressive and will certainly influence all subsequent studies of the structure of Hebrews. In particular, Guthrie's attention to the transitional devices utilized by the writer to tie together the different segments of his discourse marks a major advance in the investigation of the literary structure of Hebrews.

Guthrie recognized that an area of investigation that has tended to be neglected in discussions of the structure of Hebrews is the writer's method of executing smooth transitions from one segment of the discourse to another. Perhaps more than any other consideration, that fact accounts for the range of diversity in current attempts to outline Hebrews. Guthrie's concern has been to discern those

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