I. Introduction

This past spring, my family and I had the opportunity to take a research leave in Cambridge, England. The time could not have been more delightful and was quite productive. While in Cambridge, I visited the UL, the University Library, and found myself in a wonderful labyrinth of reading rooms, corridors, lifts, halls, wings, and toilets. As I made my way to the part of the multi-storied complex in which I was interested, I constantly had to refer to my small map of the library, and even so, at times found myself staring at a door or stairway that led to who knows where, wondering whether some student might suddenly laugh at me for being so obviously out of place. To risk oversimplifying greatly, to find one’s way around such a complex structure, one must know where one is at all times, and how the building is laid out. Further, one’s location in the UL at Cambridge will determine what one sees at any given moment.

I have been asked to address briefly the structure of Hebrews, and there is some logic to beginning with this area of Hebrews research, for how we read the wonderfully complex structure of this elegant book has a certain impact on several of the other topics that will be addressed today.

II. Retrospect

One way of cataloging past proposals on Hebrews’ structure has been to organize the discussion according to methodology used in analysis. Thus, we can speak of thematic approaches, which continue to this day, mostly in

The Structure of Hebrews: Retrospect and Prospect

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introductions to the New Testament and devotional commentaries. Rhetorical criticism, applied to the question of Hebrews’ structure in times past has been used in its more recent iterations most notably in the work of Walter Übelacker, Keijo Nissilä and, in a very different way, with radically different results, Paolo Garuti, and has played a foundational role on the structure question in commentaries such as those by David DeSilva and Craig Koester.

As to literary analyses, there looms the vastly influential work of Albert Vanhoye, delineating literary devices such as hook words and uses of *inclusio* as key markers in Hebrews’ development. Current responses to Vanhoye normally applaud his ground-breaking insights, while registering an uneasiness with aspects of his final proposal.

The past two decades have witnessed the rise of linguistic analyses, such as the treatment by Linda Neeley, my own work, and, most recently, a dissertation by Cynthia Long Westfall to be published in the JSNTS series. Discourse Analysis, by definition, has the potential to offer an eclectic theoretical framework that can incorporate insights from other methodologies, analyzing how features of rhetorical style, or literary conventions fit into the author’s communication strategy.

Continued work on the structure of Hebrews has been carried forward in the form of dissertations, brief articles, commentaries, and reviews, and a certain progress seems to be being made.

Yet, where do we go from here?

**III. Prospect**

First, there are challenges to progress on the question of Hebrews’ structure that
are systemic to current New Testament studies generally. The emphasis on rapid and mass production of materials, across a spectrum of purposes, both in the academy and the church, does not always lend itself to carefully considered analysis of the text. For instance, introductions to the New Testament often present Hebrews’ structure in some repackaged form of the old thematic approach, built around the “greater than” motif, rather than interacting with more recent research. Of the reviews of my Brill monograph, only about one in four offer substantive interaction on specific issues of the interpretation of data in the text. Although I deeply appreciate the affirmation of those who have given a summary of the book and concluded that it makes a genuine contribution, it has been those truly critical reviews, such as the one by Vanhoye himself, that have helped me develop and clarify my own understanding of Hebrews’ structure.

Second, we work in a context of methodological fragmentation, and there is need to discuss how we can incorporate helpful analyses from various methodologies that can aid us in hearing the text. We need to continue to reap the benefits of rhetorical analyses on the micro-level of the text; we need to continue to develop text-linguistics, ask questions about orality dynamics, and pursue matters of pragmatics, and perhaps questions raised by hermeneutical approaches such as speech act theory.

When fresh work is done, we need to interact with it at the level of the text, gleaning its insights and challenging its conclusions, and, although time is slipping away, this is where I would like to conclude.

I mentioned above the work of Cynthia Long Westfall, a dissertation produced under Stan Porter and soon to be published in the JSNTS series. I present it to you as an important, recent work on the structure of Hebrews, one which has real strengths, along with what some might judge to be weaknesses. I will be working up a full-length critical review once the monograph is released, but I would like to
make a few comments on the dissertation itself and urge you to read it carefully when it is released in monograph form.

Westfall’s dissertation is entitled, “A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: Relationship between Form and Meaning.” The author presents a survey of past work on the structure of Hebrews in Chapter 1, placing various approaches in categories and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each (much in the vein of Guthrie, The Structure of Hebrews, 3-41). Chapter 2 presents a cogent overview of the current state of Discourse Analysis as applied to New Testament studies and focuses on systemic-functional linguistics, from which Westfall draws for her methodology. That method involves a four-step analysis: identifying cohesion patterns and shifts, topic, prominence, and relationship with the co-text. Chapters 3-6 present a detailed analysis of the text of Hebrews and Chapter 7 a summary conclusion in which a picture of the structure of Hebrews as a whole is offered.

There are a number of obvious strengths to this work:

a. Dr. Westfall’s analysis of the text follows her methodology rigorously. Her strength is in gathering data, and, for the most part, her exegesis of the details of Hebrews is sound.

b. She follows through on the data uncovered and applies it to her understanding of the structure of Hebrews. Some attempts at discourse analysis uncover genuine insights but then have trouble applying those insights in a coherent picture of the whole. The author, in this case follows through nicely with her analysis.

c. Her analysis of the role of Connectives, for the most part, is very helpful.

d. Her conclusions on the prominence of the hortatory subjunctives in the discourse further highlight the hortatory intent of the book.
However, there are a number of questions that will need to be considered carefully with regard to the dissertation.

First, Westfall could be read as misreading the function of documented literary patterns from the first-century world. These include especially the use of *inclusio* in the book, as well as the *exempla* of Hebrews 11. Westfall seems to read the former as disjunctive in terms of discourse cohesion, and the latter as expositional rather than hortatory.

Second, on p. 1 of her work, W. rightly notes, “The best methodology will be able to give an account of the formal and semantic features that the other methodologies utilize.” How true. Yet, W. could be understood as guilty both of ignoring and, at times, overriding data. For example, she does not give any account for the numerous uses of hook-words, as detailed by Vaganay, Vanhoye, and Guthrie. Further, W. gives no clear account of the role played by the dominant patterns of lexical repetition between 2:17-3:2 and 4:14-5:3, nor for the clear distant parallels between 5:1-3 and 7:26-28, and several other cases of what others have identified as uses of *inclusio*.

Third, her insight concerning the role of the hortatory subjunctive at 4:11 is well-taken, but that use is balanced by the hortatory subjunctive at 4:1. These two hortatory subjunctives are in the same unit, according to Westfall, so why does the one at 4:1 have no formal role in the macro-structure of the book that is obvious? Should it be included with the other hortatory subjunctives in chap. 4? Could both of these hortatory subjunctives in 4:1 and 4:11 play a transitional role, leading into the book’s great, central section, marked by the opening of a grand *inclusio* at 4:14-16.

Finally, there are other data noted in Guthrie that are not addressed, such as the “parallel introductions” at 1:5/5:5 and 5:1/8:3. Westfall may write all of the above
off as various forms of lexical repetition having no definitive role in the macro-
structure of Hebrews, but it may be suggested that the distinctiveness and
consistency of such lexical patterns will not allow such an assessment.

In spite of these questions, Westfall has done careful and important work here. A
number of insights that come out in her analysis of the text genuinely advance
the discussion on the structure of Hebrews. While I am more convinced than
ever of my basic approach to the embedded discourses of Hebrews, certain
insights from W. have been very helpful and will be incorporated in my work in
the future. This is how we move forward.

Hebrews is a beautifully complex work, calling for extensive, detailed study by
those who would understand her. In some ways the book is more like Ely
Cathedral, which my family toured more than once while in the UK, than the UL in
Cambridge. Its beauty awes us and its complexity will certainly keep us all busy
on this question of its structure for years to come.