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Book Review: Cohesion and Structure in the Pastoral Epistles

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With regard to the continuity/discontinuity between Israel and the Church, Yee situates his view against both a simple replacement of Israel with the Church and a direct line of continuity between the two. He claims, rather, that the Church as “one body” is “community-redefining imagery.” Ephesians transposes “the exclusive ‘body politic of Israel’ into an inclusive (and non-ethnic) community-body in which the ‘holy ones’/Israel and Gentiles who believe in the Messiah could be together as a harmonious whole (hence, ‘in one body’)” (p. 176). With regard to the authorship of the letter, Yee refers throughout his work to “the author” of the letter in order to avoid distracting from the main point of his thesis (p. 33).

While this review has focused on several points of disagreement with Yee’s exegesis, this is only because his thesis is so compelling and faithful to the text of Ephesians 2. His work constitutes a vitally important engagement with Ephesians, which future scholarship on the letter simply cannot ignore. His various statements and restatements of Jewish exclusivism creatively express the Jewish attitudes that were current in the first century and that needed to be overcome by the death and resurrection of Christ. For this reason future dialogue on the “new perspective” will benefit greatly from Yee. This work, especially his discussion of “the law of commandments in ordinances” (pp. 154–61), shows how insights from the “new perspective” can bring to light features of the text that are relatively inexplicable on a “traditional” reading.

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Are the Pastoral Epistles a hodgepodge of disconnected literary “marbles” collected by an author/editor, somewhat mysteriously placed into one textual “bag” for no apparent reason? Or are they a set of documents that reflect a demonstrable individual structure and possess an inner coherence, both textually and conceptually? These are the options R. Van Neste takes up in what is the fruit of his doctoral studies under the tutelage of I. H. Marshall of Aberdeen University, Scotland.

Van Neste sets his study against the backdrop of a growing trend in Pastorals scholarship. The prevailing view until recently (the 1980s), among supporters and non-supporters of Pauline authorship alike, was that these letters represented clumsy combinations of differing literary forms. However, within the last twenty-five years scholarship increasingly has argued for the theological and literary coherence of these letters. Yet, not all have been convinced. In particular, the author points to James D. Miller’s work (The Pastoral Letters and Composite Documents [SNTSMS 93; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]). Far from being swayed by the growing consensus, Miller tries to undermine such an assessment by working through these letters paragraph by paragraph (and sometimes phrase by phrase) in an attempt to show discontinuity and incoherence at nearly every level. Thus, in order to assess this emerging consensus and as a riposte to Miller’s work, Van Neste takes up the task of tracing “the movement of language through each letter asking how each sentence or paragraph connects to the next or how the whole letter holds together linguistically” (p. 5).

The first part of his work lays out the methodology guiding his study. Here he draws primarily on the modern insights of discourse analysis (cohesion fields, semantic chains, and transitional devices) as supplemented by the more historically grounded rhetorical criticism (specifically, matters of style—chiasmus, inclusio, etc.) and studies of ancient
epistolography (use of the vocative, disclosure formulas, and παρχαλέω statements). These provide a set of devices whereby he hopes to detect and establish the boundaries of the basic literary units (paragraphs) and larger sections (a portion of discourse comprised of two or more units) as well as the coherence within and between these units and sections. By coherence he refers to the “interdependency of various elements” (p. 8) in a discourse so that the interpretation of a given element is dependent upon that of another. This interdependent linkage sets up a relation of cohesion. At the same time he recognizes that cohesiveness and lack thereof represent poles on a continuum. Thus, his analysis of the individual letters is an attempt to determine where each might fall on that continuum. In short, Van Neste hopes to analyze the structure of each letter through a close attention to the actual structural markers in an attempt to surface and approximate the intention of the author. Thereby he hopes to bound interpretive license and to chasten currently assumed views of the conceptual trajectories in the Pastorals.

After laying out his methodology, Van Neste treats each of the letters in turn in their canonical order. Each book is analyzed in order to (1) determine the boundaries of the individual paragraphs; (2) examine the cohesion within each paragraph; and, finally, (3) examine the cohesion between paragraphs. Consequently, two chapters are given to each book with the first chapter dedicated to steps (1) and (2) and the second to (3). As one might imagine, these chapters are dense reads as Van Neste pays close attention to the particulars of a given unit or set of units. However, though they call for concentration on the reader’s part and would best be engaged only after a thorough familiarity with the letters themselves, they testify to his close attention to the text in trying to allow the text, as much as possible, to structure his reconstruction of the Paul’s flow of thought.

As he concludes, Van Neste’s central contention is that each of the letters demonstrate well-defined structures that cohere. Yet, it is important to note that it is structures, in the plural, since they all manifest distinctive characteristics even in the two letters that are most alike (i.e. 1 Timothy and Titus). For example, Van Neste notes that 2 Timothy demonstrates clear connections between units (paragraphs) nearly throughout the whole book. On the other hand, 1 Timothy and Titus contain clear-cut sections (groups of paragraphs) which relate to one another symmetrically. Van Neste notes, in what appears to be his preferred ordering of the book (he gives two “complementary” possibilities), that there is an alteration between sections dealing with Timothy and the opponents (1:3–20; 3:14–4:16; 6:3–21) and those dealing with specific church groups (2:1–3:13; 5:1–6:2). Thus, while 1 Timothy coheres, its coherence, in general, is developed in a manner strikingly distinct from 2 Timothy. Following his conclusion, Van Neste helpfully provides the raw data of his cohesion shift analysis in the book’s single appendix, a real treasure trove of data that will facilitate further work along the lines of Van Neste’s.

All in all, this is a solid contribution from a young scholar. As far as I can see, Van Neste has constructed sound methodological guidelines and consistently applied them such that a neglected facet of study in the Pastorals has been more fully illumined. Moreover, it has been illumined in such a way that previous assumptions of cohesion have been given more extensive analytical grounding and direction, while assumptions of incoherence have been rendered nearly untenable. Though one may not agree with all of his exegetical and structural decisions (for indeed, determining levels of cohesion is no exact science and involves the complex interplay of various textual dynamics), one need not be convinced of every decision to profit from a work that takes us another real step forward. Indeed, Van Neste’s work furthers our appreciation for the literary artistry and theological depth of a significant portion of the Pauline corpus, a portion so often neglected even within evangelical circles. More work certainly needs to be done. Not only is this not the final word on the structure of these letters, but, as Van Neste himself
encourages his readers, what is particularly needed now is some careful thought as to how these structural insights come to bear on our understanding of the theology of these letters. This is especially intriguing when one considers what theological insights the symmetrical relationships existing between sections in 1 Timothy and Titus might hold. This is a book that serious students of these letters will be glad to have in their libraries.

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Robert W. Yarbrough is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. The agenda for this volume is clear before one opens the book, since the title is crossed out on the cover. The purpose is to show that there is no salvation-historical fallacy. Yarbrough asserts that standard accounts of NT studies in the last half of the twentieth century focused on Rudolf Bultmann, his precursors and legacy. Therefore they have neglected or invalidated the work of those who follow a salvation-historical approach. The book does not offer a synchronic study of the history of NT scholarship that begins with a particular stance and evaluates each scholar in light of that stance. Rather, it follows a diachronic method, looking at the main scholars of a particular model of understanding (“critical orthodoxy”) over against those who hold a different model (salvation history). The book does not attempt to prove a genetic relationship between any of the scholars, although such relationships probably exist. This gives the study a more historically objective appearance. The book is a helpful introduction to debates of German NT scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much of this is inaccessible to those who do not, or do not have the inclination to, read German.

Critical orthodoxy assumes that historical reasoning must be separated from the religious dimension of life. This is the legacy of Kant. Salvation history assumes that God can and does intervene in history and that this history of God’s intervention can be known by the same reasoning as any other history. In fact, the salvation-historical approach says that the sources of the history and theology of the NT are “unintelligible apart from the material influence of a transcendent God who involved himself in the historical process in much the same way that biblical writers claim” (p. 9).

The mid-nineteenth-century works of F. C. Baur and J. C. K. von Hofmann are set against each other in chapter 1. Baur followed a Cartesian and Kantian epistemology that forced him to assert a modern method of research (“pure history” devoid of divine intervention), which is inimical to the NT texts. Hofmann’s work on NT theology has often been neglected, but was thoroughly researched for this book. Hofmann proposes that NT theology arises from the texts themselves rather than from a presupposed modern epistemology imposed upon the texts. It is based on “a history which happened, not merely was thought” (p. 40). Throughout the volume Yarbrough points out the attitude toward the OT adopted by various scholars. Inevitably, those of the critical orthodoxy camp downplay the influence of the OT on NT theology, while salvation-historical scholars see the OT as a vital background to the discipline.

The second pair of scholars is W. Wrede and A. Schlatter (chap. 2). These two scholars opposed each other at the turn of the twentieth century. Their debate was discussed by