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The Literary Development of John 13-17: A Chiastic Reading

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In this book Brouwer attempts to show both that the literary device of chiasmic construction was used far more widely and in longer passages of ancient literature than has heretofore been thought and that the Farewell Discourse of John's Gospel is best understood as just such a longer form of chiasm. By looking at John in this manner, Brouwer says, we can best account for the discourse's apparent inconsistencies, narrative breaks, and reduplication of passages. Brouwer presents his case in a well-constructed argument, being careful to allow room for both disagreement and uncertainty in his own conclusion. On the other hand, it is also clear that Brouwer makes an assumption about the text that, while interesting, also functions as the lynchpin upon which the entire edifice of his argument depends. Despite this, Brouwer's work is still extremely useful, considering that he chose a different path from those usually trod by John critics, both the textual critics, such as Bultmann, who see the composition of the Farewell Discourse—and the Gospel as a whole—as merely the accident of the redactor's choices, and those who follow a theological approach, seeing the apparent inconsistencies in the text as intentional markers of a deeper significance (an approach that Brouwer points out has been part of Johannine interpretation since late antiquity). What Brouwer does is attempt a path between these extremes that accounts for both the possibility of multiple sources and redaction of separate narratives into a single text and the intentional creation of a theological interpretation of Jesus' last night with his disciples.

Brouwer sets forth his argument in a clear and methodical manner, presenting examples of chiasm in ancient writing and its reception in modern scholarship as well as previous work on this topic. Further, he is careful to separate wishful thinking from what may be derived from the text itself; that is, he acknowledges the danger of letting an a priori conclusion “drive” the argument. Still, in the end, what is achieved is rather less than what was implied at the beginning. By setting his foot along this path that others have already trodden, like them, Brouwer’s argument for reading these chapters as a large chiasmus does not quite convince—yet he himself seems ready to admit this.

In the first chapters he establishes for the reader what chiasm is and its place in ancient literature. In the next two chapters, he discusses commonly observed characteristics of chiastic writing—which he acknowledges usually is thought of as occurring only in short passages—and both the possibility of longer chiasms and, following the work most often of Craig Blomberg, what the distinguishing characteristics of the longer form of chiasm might be.

In the second half of the book, Brouwer sets forth his analysis of the Farewell Discourse as a macrochiasm, based on Blomberg’s methodology. In this section, Brouwer analyzes the discourse pericope by pericope. He shows how the entire section of the Gospel appears to center on the discussion of the vine in John 15 (something long noted in Johannine interpretation), with matching imagery and ideas balanced on either side. He also shows that macrochiastic analysis has been used a number of times in the past century to account for this passage’s structure, though Brouwer finds that these analyses have been done to demonstrate one particular interpretation of either the history of the text or the intentionality of the text’s construction. This means that it (macrochiasm) accounts for either a reading that claims that the apparent inconsistencies in John’s text—such as why Jesus asks why no one asked where he is going (16:5) after having answered just that question, or ordering his disciples to “let us be on our way” (14:31) then remaining for three more chapters of discourse—were the product of theological thinking on the part of the author or redactor (that “let us be on our way” signifies not physical but spiritual movement within the discourse), or that the text found itself in its present condition diachronically because the redactor could not safely dispose of any part of the text. Brouwer’s hypothesis rests on what he considers to be the essential criteria (again, following Blomberg) of a macrochiasm: that, among other criteria, other approaches are problematic compared to a chiastic reading, that there is “clear parallelism between chiastic halves,” that there is “verbal and conceptual parallelism between halves,” and so on, culminating in a final criterion that there be “a chiastic center of significance.”

To all of these criteria, Brouwer finds that John 13-17 is a match. As mentioned above, Brouwer recognizes that the problems long associated with this text can be accounted for by only a few means: that the text is disjointed by nature (so Bultmann); that the text represents a spiritual transformation of the discourse (so Dodd); or that the text represents either a delay in physical movement, meaning the usual delay in telling a

group of people to go and their actual movement (so Westcott), or “transitional movement” that the command was obeyed at the moment given and that the subsequent discourse was given while the group was already moving (so Chrysostom). For Brouwer, a macrochiastic reading best accounts for the text because it takes into account and allows for all these possibilities and still allows the text to stand as we find it in the Gospel. Following this, Brouwer presents synopses of several scholars who have used a chiastic reading to analyze this discourse, though he finds that each falls short of his own insights into the text, based on his use of Blomberg’s method.

However, the question remains of whether this explanation, though useful, is useful enough. Except for one scenario in the history of this text—and one that Brouwer addresses—I think that the answer must be a provisional no for this reason: it still does not fully address the problems raised by Bultmann and others about the apparent disjunctures in the text. While a chiastic reading might account for the delay between Jesus commanding that they leave and their actual leaving, it does not account for similar disjunctures in other parts of the Gospel. For example, the transition between the hymn of the Logos in 1:1-18 and the beginning of the narrative concerning Jesus and John’s encounter at the Jordan represents a break that is hardly amenable to a chiastic reading. Other breaks between discourses and episodes of miracle working also are difficult to fit into the chiastic framework Brouwer finds in the Farewell Discourse. Two examples include: (1) the friction between the statements in John at 2:11 and 4:54 noting that these miracles (wine at Cana and the healing of the official’s son) were the first and second signs of Jesus and statements between them (e.g., 2:23) that Jesus performed “many signs”; and (2) the sudden jump in scenery from Jerusalem to the east bank of the Sea of Galilee (5:47-6:1). Further, a chiastic reading cannot account for the stark break between what appears to be the first and second ending of John. Indeed, each of these examples is better accounted for by attributing them to the redactor of the Gospel’s sources. As mentioned above, there is one scenario—and one that Brouwer does acknowledge (169-70)—that allows a chiastic reading of the Farewell Discourse, and perhaps the Farewell Discourse only, and that is that the chiastic structure was imposed on the text by the final redactor of the text. Yet, again, what remains troubling about the chiastic scenario is that while it fits pretty well with John 13-17 it does not fit well (again, as Brouwer himself notes [155-56]) with the rest of the Gospel. If one were to posit a methodological approach to reading one segment of this text, the method ought to be applicable to the rest of the text; at present it is not. In essence, Brouwer assumes that the redactor of the text was troubled by the disjunctures of the text and worked to minimize them—yet we find that the other disjunctures have no such solution. Indeed, without this assumption, the argument of the book is significantly weakened.

Still, as Brouwer himself notes, a chiastic reading of the text of John in particular, and other long passages from antiquity more generally, is an under-explored area of criticism. Perhaps it might be fruitful to revisit a macrochiastic reading of the whole text of John, beginning with microchiasms throughout the text—if they exist throughout—then

exploring any possible macrochiastic connections that could account for the long-recognized disjunctures elsewhere in the text. It is to be hoped that Brouwer will pursue this line of investigation despite the cautions noted above, especially in light of Brouwer's intellectual honesty and integrity in threading that straight and narrow path between incautiously leaping ahead of his argument into speculative fantasy regarding the efficaciousness of his method and devolving into kerygmatic exposition on the "Truth" of John's Gospel. It will be interesting to see the argument evolve.