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Cohesion and Structure in the Pastoral Epistles

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Scholars who delve into the Pastoral Epistles almost inevitably throw up their hands in an attempt to explain the logic of one passage or another. All of them, Van Neste contends, need to try harder. In this book, his Aberdeen doctoral dissertation directed by I. Howard Marshall, Van Neste builds a case for the cohesiveness of each of the three letters, making no attempt to argue for the cohesiveness of the three as a collection.

After an introduction and a chapter on method, chapters 2, 4, and 6 analyze individual thought units (paragraphs) within 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, respectively. Van Neste offers convincing arguments for delimiting each unit with no surprises. Beginning students of exegesis would do well to observe how he defines the limits of each pericope. Having defined a unit, he proceeds to analyze it for internal cohesiveness, based on such factors as “literary form (or subgenre), topic, subject, participants, verb tense, person, and number, as well as temporal and local frames of reference” (9).

The necessary though tedious work of chapters 2, 4, and 6 receives a payoff in chapters 3, 5, and 7. Here Van Neste argues for the cohesion of each letter as a whole. Each of these chapters presents three lines of argument. First, Van Neste looks for evidence of cohesion between each unit and those that precede and follow it. The method is similar to that used to establish cohesion within each section, with emphasis on linguistic connections.

Second, he traces major themes, or “semantic chains,” that run throughout each letter. For the most part, these are well known, though there are occasional surprises. For example, Van Neste ably establishes an eschatological perspective throughout 2 Timothy with a possible exception in chapter 3 (212–13). He is right to highlight this theme, but he could eliminate the supposed gap in chapter 3 by combining the theme of eschatology with

those of suffering (218–19) and opposition (219–22), all of which could be seen as part of a larger apocalyptic perspective that permeates the letter and puts 2 Timothy close to the undisputed Pauline letters.

Third, Van Neste teases out a macrostructure for each letter. For the body of 1 Timothy, he offers an innovative analysis (141–44):

- 1:3–20 On Timothy and Opponents
- 2:1–3:13 On Specific Church Groups
- 3:14–4:16 On Timothy and Opponents
- 5:1–6:2 On Specific Church Groups
- 6:3–21 On Timothy and Opponents

This moves helpfully away from the tendency to read this letter as “church order,” since it shows that the larger framework consists of exhortations to and about Timothy. By placing 3:14–4:16 at the center, Van Neste has correctly identified where to look for the main thrust of the letter. I would argue that the letter is primarily concerned with shaping Timothy as a youthful minister and not primarily about rules for church “offices.”

Helpful also is Van Neste’s analysis of Titus (273–82), which I abbreviate here:

- 1:5–9 Body opening
- a. 1:10–16 Opponents
- b. 2:1–15 Doctrine
- 2:1–10 Lifestyles reflecting sound doctrine
- 2:11–14 Doctrinal basis
- 2:15 Summary exhortation
- b. 3:1–14 Doctrine
- 3:1–2 Lifestyles reflecting sound doctrine
- 3:3–7 Doctrinal basis
- 3:8 Summary exhortation
- a. 3:9–11 Opponents
- 3:12–14 Body closing

Van Neste offers a simple analysis of the body of 2 Timothy (224–32):

- 1:3–2:13 Paul and Timothy—“Hold Fast”
- 2:14–3:9 Timothy and Opponents—“Avoid Them”
- 3:10–4:8 Paul and Timothy—“Do the Ministry”

One may notice a tendency to find chiastic structures everywhere. This outline of 2 Timothy downplays the degree to which opponents feature in all three sections. I would

view the themes of opposition and suffering as integrally related, so that references to suffering (e.g., 1:8, 12; 2:3, 13; 3:11–13; 4:5) imply some sort of opposition. Further, Van Neste is unsure how to treat 3:10–17, which he views as a hinge between two larger sections. In my opinion, it would be simpler to read the letter as an alternation between exhortations and *exempla*. Most of the *exempla* are of Paul, but there are also Onesiphoros (1:16–18) and negative counter-examples (1:15; 3:1–9). Still, Van Neste is on the right track in sensing that 3:10–17 somehow stands out, in my opinion as a programmatic exhortation.

Van Neste is influenced by the rubrics of discourse analysis, especially as developed by S. E. Porter and J. T. Reed. According to Van Neste, such analysis looks for linguistic cohesiveness, or “how language is used to create connections” (5). But he confuses the issue with his definition of terms. On the one hand, he defines “cohesion” and “coherence” (used interchangeably) as “the quality of a text which creates a sense that it ‘hangs together,’ and makes sense” (8), or, following Reed, “cohesiveness is created by speakers saying similar kinds of things ... about similar kinds of phenomena” (8–9). This is a low threshold, which would seem to allow for stream of consciousness, catchword progressions, or interpolations of related points. But on the other hand, he offers a different definition of cohesion from Holliday and Hasan: “Cohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one PRESUPPOSES the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it” (8). This establishes a higher threshold that would seem to demand tighter argumentation and disallow interpolation theories. But in most of his analyses Van Neste generally clears only the lower threshold, which still leaves room for his opponents to maneuver.

Van Neste’s primary debate partner is James D. Miller, whose monograph *The Pastoral Letters as Composite Documents* (SNTSMS 93; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) offered a more nuanced version of P. N. Harrison’s old theory that the Pastorals were post-Pauline creations built around authentic fragments of Pauline letters. Miller surveyed the literature of the exilic and Second Temple periods and early Christianity to conclude that, “No matter where one looks in the literary landscape of which the Pastoral letters are a part, the textual evidence reveals unmistakable signs of frequent and substantive editing. Many of these texts are clearly amalgamations of previously independent materials. Traditional materials have been gathered together and woven into sacred collections” (Miller, 36). Miller observed that “[t]he direction of thought in [the Pastorals] is frequently broken by unexpected shifts in subject matter.... The letters lack any clear development of thought, sustained argument, or even unifying theme, and consequently defy any attempt at an orderly outline. This lack of order and cohesiveness is not confined to a small paranetic section of the letters (where one might expect it) but

permeates the documents as a whole” (Miller, 13). This supposed “lack of order and cohesiveness” is precisely what Van Neste contests, and he demonstrates that Miller overstated his case. Yet Van Neste likewise overdraws his conclusions. He is skeptical of any suggestion that a passage might contain an interpolation or simply a lapse in logic, and he ignores the comparative literary context on which Miller’s argument was based. Miller did not posit that these letters grew willy-nilly; rather,

each of our three Pastorals originated as an authentic note written by the apostle to Timothy and Titus.... Over the course of transmission, the notes were expanded by the addition of other sacred community traditions; the expansion was not intended to make the letters “look” Pauline; rather, it was motivated by the community’s desire to preserve the traditions and to be instructed by them. (Miller, 146)

One could argue that the letters contain some rambling, ill-thought-out arguments or that scribes inserted glosses on related topics. Either event would meet Van Neste’s lower threshold of cohesiveness while accounting for disruption in the flow of the argument.

One example from 2 Tim 2:17–21 illustrates the problem. The context, 2:14–26, reflects linguistic cohesiveness in dealing with how Timothy, as the carrier of Pauline teaching (2:2), models the behavior expected of all teachers in the community. Timothy’s conduct (2:15, 22) serves as an example to other teachers. Teachers should admonish (2:14), educate (2:24), and teach (2:23), and they should avoid “empty speeches” (2:16) and “foolish and uneducated speculations” (2:23). They should not engage in “battles” (*logomachein*, 2:14; *machai*, 2:23; *machesthai*, 2:24) but should be concerned about “truth” (2:15, 18, 24). Yet, despite overall linguistic cohesiveness, the logic of the argument is not clear. The tenor of 2:25–26 is that Timothy should reach out to opponents, seeking to turn them in the right direction, but it is unclear how the two illustrations in 2:17–19 and 20–21 support this exhortation.

For one thing, the pronoun “their” (*auton*, 2:17) has no antecedent, so we must at least pause to notice the awkwardness of the grammar. Verse 17 introduces Hymenaios and Philetos, Christian teachers who propound a deviant doctrine of the resurrection. The author does not discuss this doctrine but simply equates his own position with the “sure foundation of God” (2:19), on which are inscribed two texts. The first inscription, “The Lord knows his own,” is a quotation of Num 16:5. This allusion to Korah’s rebellion implies that God will deal summarily with those who challenge the authority of the Pauline tradition. The second inscription, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness,” is more difficult, because its source is unknown. The exact expression “name the name of the Lord” appears in a negative sense of pronouncing the

Tetragrammaton (Lev 24:16), but such a reading hardly fits into the logic of the passage. So the expression is usually understood in a positive sense (e.g., Isa 26:13 LXX; cf. Josh 23:7) as equivalent to “call on the name of the Lord” in 2:22. Meanwhile, “turn away from wickedness” resembles Num 16:26, which takes us back to Korah. Interpreters sometimes speculate that the inscription is from some otherwise unknown text. But it is difficult to draw definite conclusions, since there is no certain quotation of any text that we can subject to literary or historical analysis. At least one and perhaps both inscriptions refer to Korah, implying a harsh condemnation of rebels against God.

The second illustration is also problematic. The transition is abrupt, with no logical transition between 2:19 and 20. Further, the images in 2:20–21 have antecedents in the Pauline letters that push in different directions. On the one hand, a “great house” containing vessels of gold, silver, wood, and pottery calls to mind the image of God’s temple in 1 Cor 3:12–17, both in terms of the foundation and the various building materials. That passage suggests a conciliatory attitude toward rivals. On the other hand, “vessel for honor” (2:21) resembles Rom 9:21, which predicts destruction for any supposed “vessel of dishonor.” The choice might be easier if we were certain about the antecedent of “these” (*touton*, 2:21), from which one should purify oneself. If it is masculine (“these teachers”), this is another harsh dismissal of false teachers, as Rom 9:21 might imply. But if it is neuter (“these behaviors”), then it allows some latitude for working with rival teachers to bring them along, as 1 Cor 3:12–17 might imply. That would lead naturally toward 2:25–26, but it would run against the grain of 2:17–19.

How might we account for the conflicting attitudes toward opponents in this passage? Do they reflect a historical or social context, or is it a matter of our failure to grasp the force of the quotations, or a lapse in the author’s logic, or an editorial gloss? The difficulties of explaining how 2 Tim 2:17–19 and 20–21 fit into 2:14–26 illustrate the shortcomings of Van Neste’s approach. While his linguistic analysis is necessary for establishing the cohesiveness of the passage, it is not sufficient. An argument for cohesiveness must also address such matters as the use of texts and the social and historical situations being addressed.

I do not mean to suggest that Van Neste’s work is not useful, only that it is insufficient to deliver the *coup de grâce* that he claims against Miller (285). His low threshold for proof of cohesiveness based on linguistic connections alone will not satisfy those who wrestle with apparent lapses in the logic of the argument. The effect of his rigidly linguistic approach is that his arguments often seem mechanical, like a translation made by a computer that is oblivious to subtleties of style and cultural nuance. Too often, Van Neste supports his decisions simply by counting heads among a few commentators rather than wrestling with the literary and historical data that undergird their arguments. Where

Miller emphasizes lapses in the style or logic of an argument, Van Neste often responds only by pointing out lexical and syntactical connections. But Miller's theory of editorial accretions would not necessarily be incompatible with Van Neste's linguistic connections, since compilers should be expected to insert comments that are related to the base text, however loosely.

This book is a thoroughgoing demonstration of two steps in the exegetical process. It will be useful for scholars who want more detailed discussion of the linguistic cohesion of a given pericope or the macrostructure of each letter than is often found in commentaries. It will also be useful for students of exegetical method who want good examples of how to define the limits of a pericope and how to think about the linguistic structure of an argument.