SOME COMMENTS ON STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

BY

ROBERT C. CULLEY

Montreal

Discussion of structuralism and structural analysis is slowly but surely finding its way into biblical studies.¹ Some may welcome it. Some may shudder at the prospect. Either way we will be obliged to come to terms with it. This paper has been characterized as "comments" for good reason. When it comes to an understanding of structuralism and structural analysis as it exists and is practised in a great variety of disciplines, including anthropology, folklore, linguistics, and literary criticism, my knowledge is limited and I would have to be considered an outsider. But even an outsider can make comments, especially when he finds structural analysis being carried on in what he considers to be his field of interest, biblical studies.

One problem which must be faced at the start is that "structural analysis" is not easily defined.² One may speak of a certain scholar's way of doing "structural analysis" or another scholar's way of doing "structural analysis" but there does not seem to be a simple way of stating what they are all doing. This problem is freely conceded.³ Nor is it necessarily a bad thing. Nevertheless this difficulty should not be underestimated. It will be important in any discussion to strive to make necessary distinctions and qualifications and to avoid misleading generalizations, without at the same time quibbling needlessly over terms, since it is what is being done to texts and its possible value which is of primary interest not what the method or approach may be called.

¹ See the paper read by Paul Beauchamp at the Uppsala Congress, "L'analyse structurale et l'exégèse biblique," and the references in the notes to recent literature.
² The term "structuralism" will not be used to avoid any suggestion of a philosophy or ideology when what is at issue is a way of analyzing texts.
If the problem of defining structural analysis is complex, the problem of assessing it is equally so. In order to make comments which might deserve serious consideration, it is necessary to limit the scope of the discussion to manageable proportions which at the same time allow for some measure of control or testing. Thus, the strategy of this paper is to examine one scholar’s attempt to apply structural analysis to biblical material. The scholar in question is E. R. Leach, a social anthropologist at Cambridge. The disadvantages of this strategy are clear. Not everyone who considers himself a structural analyst would want to be held responsible for what Leach does. Although going his own way, Leach is closely aligned with Claude Lévi-Strauss and “myth” is an important concept mentioned continually in the discussion.

One last point before moving on to the work of Leach. In order to try to relate the discussion of structural analysis to biblical studies in a positive way, it might be useful to suggest a broader frame of reference or context which might be labelled “the interpretation of texts”. Even though this term is even vaguer than “structural analysis”, it could be argued that interpretation of texts involves a study of two things at least: first, a study of as many different levels or aspects of a given text as possible and, second, a consideration of how the results of such investigations can or must be related to each other when trying to establish the meaning of the text. When it comes to the structures of language at or below the sentence level, we can discuss these with a certain amount of sophistication. At least contemporary linguistics offers some acceptable options for this procedure. But what about structures in larger segments of the text above the sentence level, which in biblical studies might be the size of a chapter, several chapters, a book, or several books? Surely it is important to explore options for describing structures above the sentence level as well. Here “structure” is used in a broad sense to indicate that the number and kind of structures to be found in texts are likely not limited to those proposed by practitioners of “structural analysis” in the narrower sense. In this context a consideration of Leach’s application of structural analysis to biblical texts may prove

1 In what follows material has been used from two earlier papers: “Should Edmund Leach Be Cast Out of the Garden of Eden and Made to Take Lévi-Strauss with Him?” read at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, Winnipeg, June 1970, and “A Structural Anthropologist at King David’s Court,” read at the Society of Biblical Literature, New York, October 1970.