

**Albert Vanhoye. *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Subsidia Biblica 12. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1989. ISBN: 88-7653-571-3. Pp. ix+120. \$15.00 USD. Paper.**

1. Vanhoye's *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews* represents a masterly discussion of this New Testament book. The work brings an enormous contribution to the study of Hebrews, by proposing an ingenious analysis of the book's structure, while departing from the conventional biblical scholarship on the book. Thus, it seems rather unfortunate that a review of this colossal work is not readily available to the wider audience. That was the main reason behind this attempt at writing a review of a book that was published almost seventeen years ago.

2. Vanhoye's pioneering work on the Epistle to the Hebrews remained largely marginalized for a couple of decades. It was originally written in his native French and accessible to only a handful of enthusiasts and renowned New Testament scholars. Yet these did not spare their effort, and since they recognized the true value of Vanhoye's work, they kept calling for an English translation (for such a call some three years before the publication of this book see Black 1986).

3. The present work is the result of that call for translation. It was published in English some seventeen years ago as a compilation of two older works by Vanhoye: 1. *A Structured Translation of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rome: 1964) and 2. *The Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Paris: 1977). James Swetnam, S.J., with the approval of the author, slightly edited the previous works in order to compile them into one volume. The latter work is a very accessible presentation of the literary genre of Hebrews. In this volume it was placed at the beginning, since it was concerned mostly with the introductory points (e.g., purpose, provenance, authorship and date of Hebrews). In the introduction Vanhoye convincingly and rather amusingly argues against the established conventional title "Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews." Here he affirms that Hebrews is not a letter/epistle, since its literary form reveals a masterpiece of oratory, which makes it a sermon. Secondly, Vanhoye argues that the addressees were by no means Hebrews, but Christians, as the evidence from the book itself demonstrates (the author commends the addressees for keeping the faith and speaks about two generations of their ancestors who kept the same faith [see pp. 1-3]). Regarding the authorship, Vanhoye admits inability to conclusively identify the author, but argues that the author could easily be from the Pauline milieu, because of a number of connection points between the Pauline corpus and Hebrews, (3-6). Finally, regarding the date, Vanhoye holds that Hebrews was written shortly before 70 C.E., since the author in Heb 10:1-3:11 describes the liturgy of the Temple as being contemporary (6).

4. The same work, *The Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, is also concerned with the problem of priesthood in the Old Testament cult. Also, it addresses the appropriation and reinterpretation of the idea of priesthood by Hebrews and its connection with the mystery of Christ. Vanhoye's careful treatment of the idea of Christ's priesthood in Hebrews forces him to conclude that the author of Hebrews did not start from scratch, but the elements pointing to this direction already existed in the gospel catechesis, apostolic

preaching, and probably in the life of various Christian communities. Vanhoye refers to the words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper over the cup of wine, where he established a new covenant in his blood and revoked the old covenant, as the most important support of this theory (16). It is precisely this idea of Christ's priesthood that Vanhoye takes as his introductory point for his brilliant analysis of the structure of Hebrews. Vanhoye takes this message and traces it throughout the book, convincingly demonstrating that it must be the book's central idea, since the whole structure of Hebrews seems to be ordered around the concept of Christ's (high) priesthood.

**5.** The structure of Hebrews proposed by Vanhoye was built upon an earlier suggestion of Vaganay. Vanhoye claims that in Hebrews one can discern a carefully constructed chiasmic structure. Certain key words ("hook words") appear to be interwoven in the structure. These can be found both at the beginning and at the end (or at least close to the end) of each section of the text (see Vanhoye 1963). The most commonly cited example of this is the mention of "angels" in Heb 1:4, which introduces a section on the Son and angels that begins with Heb 1:5. Then in Heb 2:16 "angels" appear again with the restatement of statements made at the beginning of the section in order to close the literary unit (Black 1986: 165). The chiasmic structure of the book, according to Vanhoye, reaches its climax in Heb 9:11, where Christ is described as "High Priest of goods things to come" (40a-40b; see also Just 2005: 6).

**6.** It is interesting to note that Vanhoye is aware of the motifs from Old Testament apocalypticism, but he seems very little interested in exploring them further. Vanhoye explains the somewhat confusing references to angels in the first two chapters of Hebrews as an appeal of the author to the common understanding of the period that the angels were mediators between God and humanity, in order to support his argument that Christ, as the Son of God, is an incomparably better mediator than angels, being in so much more intimate relation with the Father/God (49).

**7.** The chiasmic structure of Hebrews is also informed by a number of announcements and anticipations, on the part of the author, of the subjects which are to be treated later in the text. For example, in Heb 1:4 he announces that the name of Christ is a name better than that of angels. This theme is expanded in Heb 1:5-2:18. Also, in Heb 2:17-18 Christ is presented as a merciful and faithful High Priest, a theme that is explored in Heb 3:1-5:10. The theme of the sacerdotal work of Christ as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek is announced in 5:9-10 and explored in 5:11-10:39. Also, in 10:36-39 the author speaks of men of endurance and faith, and then illustrates the character of such men in 11:1-12:13. Finally, in 12:13 advice is given to "make straight the path for your feet," and then the thought is explained from 12:15-13:18 (see Black 1986: 168-169).

**8.** It should also be noted that, for Vanhoye, Hebrews has the character of a priestly homily that was probably intended for the occasion of celebration of the Lord's Supper. Thus, he argues that Hebrews was originally a liturgical sermon (45-46).

**9.** Finally, at the end of the present book Vanhoye includes a translation of Hebrews clearly depicting his arguments. This effort contributes greatly to the clarification of his,

at times, rather complex argument based on a combination of a number of both theological and rhetorical points.

**10.** Even though Vanhoye's work is over forty years old now, the frequency with which it is quoted suggests that it has not yet become obsolescent. Finally, it is with great pleasure that I recommend this classic to the attention of my fellow students of Hebrews, being confident that they will enjoy the clear, at moments even witty, arguments of this great New Testament scholar.

### **Bibliography**

Black, D. A. 1986. "The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and a Proposal." *Grace Theological Journal* 7: 163-177.

Just, Jr. A. A. 2005. "Entering Holiness: The High Priestly Christology of Hebrews." Paper presented at the 20th Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, 15 January 2005.

Vanhoye A. 1963. *La structure litteraire de l'Épître aux Hebreux*. Paris: Desclee.

Vasilije Vranic  
Marquette University

© Copyright TC: *A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism*, 2006.