

Albert Vanhoye. *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Subsidia Biblica, no. 12. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1989. Pp. ix+120. ISBN 88-7653-571-3. \$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 structure of "Hebrews," 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 has been published almost seventeen years now.

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 effort and, since they recognized the true value of Vanhoye's work, kept calling for an English translation (for such a call some three years before the publication of this book see Black (1986), 163-77).

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 argued against the established title of the conventional title "Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews." Here he affirmed that "Hebrews" was not a letter/epistle, since its literary form reveals a masterpiece of oratory, which makes it a sermon than. Secondly, Vanhoye argued that the addressees were by no means Hebrews, but Christians to which the evidence from "Hebrews" itself was provided (the author commends the addressees for keeping the faith and speaks about two generations of their ancestors who kept the same faith) [see Vanhoye (1986), 1-3]. Regarding the authorship Vanhoye admits inability to conclusively identify the author, but argues that the author could be easily from the Pauline milieu, because of a number of connection points between the Pauline corpus and "Hebrews," (Vanhoye (1986), pp.3-6). Finally, regarding the date, Vanhoye holds that "Hebrews" was written shortly before 70 AD, since the author in Heb. 10:1-3:11 describes the liturgy of the Temple as being contemporary (Vanhoye (1986), 6).

4. The same work, *The Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, was also concerned with the problem of priesthood in the Old Testament cult. Also, it addressed 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" forced 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 (Vanhoye (1986), 16). And 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 the Epistle to the 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 claimed 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 A., *La structure litteraire de l'Epitre aux Hebreux*, (Paris: Desclée, 1963). The most commonly referred example for 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 the things said at the beginning of the section in order to close the literary unit (Black (1986), 165). The chiasmic structure of the Epistle, according to Vanhoye, reaches climax in Heb. 9:11, where Christ is described as "High Priest of good things to come," (Vanhoye, 40a-40b (see also the paper by Just, Jr., A. A., *Entering Holiness: The High Priestly Christology of Hebrews*, 20th Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology – Concordia Theological Seminary on 15 January 2005, p.6).

6. It is interesting to note that Vanhoye is aware of the motifs from the Old Testament Apocalypticism, but seems very little interested in exploring them further. The somewhat confusing references to angels in the first two chapters of Hebrews, Vanhoye explains as appeal of the author to the common understanding of the period that the angels were the mediators between God and humanity in order to support his argument that Christ, as the Son of God, is incomparably better mediator than angels, being in so much more intimate relation with the Father/God (Vanhoye (1989), 49).

7. Further, the chiasmic structure of "Hebrews" is 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. Then, this theme is expanded in Heb. 1:5-2:18. Also, in Heb. 2:17-18 the 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 advices were given to "make straight path for your feet" and then the thought was explained from 12:15-13:18 (see Black (1986), 168-69).

8. It should also be noted that, for Vanhoye, "Hebrews" has a character of a priestly homily that was probably intended for the occasion of celebration of the Lord's Supper. Thus, he seemed to argue that "Hebrews" was originally a liturgical sermon (Vanhoye (1989), 45-6).

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

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Vasilije Vranic
Marquette University