



Vanhoye, Albert.

A Different Priest: The Epistle to the Hebrews

Translated by Leo Arnold, S.J.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Albert Vanhoye, honorary president of the International Society for the study of Biblical and Semitic Rhetoric, is a Jesuit priest recently appointed Cardinal (in 2006) by Pope Benedict XVI, has been studying and writing about the book of Hebrews for more than 50 years. He brings his expertise on this homily-letter to the Series Rhetorica Semitica, a series focused on the rhetorical analysis of Biblical books.

Vanhoye suggests that Biblical/Semitic rhetoric is different from classical Greek rhetoric (e.g., the *propositio* in classical rhetoric develops themes in the order they are announced while Hebrews develops the theme announced last because Biblical rhetoric favors chiasmic constructions [20]) but that the author of Hebrews uses both, which makes a full analysis difficult because he “plays on several planes at the same time” (19).

Vanhoye divides Hebrews according to the following scheme:

- Exordium (1:1-4)
- The Name of Christ: General Christology (1:5-2:18)
- Christ is a Trustworthy and Merciful High Priest: Priestly Christology, General Characteristics (3:1-5:10)
- Christ is the Perfect High Priest: Priestly Christology, Specific Characteristics (5:11-10:39)

- Union with Christ the High Priest through Faith and Endurance (11:1-12:13)
- Call for Right Conduct in the Search for Holiness and Peace (12:14-13:18)
- Concluding Good Wish (13:20-21)
- Dispatch Note (13:22-25)

These larger sections are then treated according to smaller subsections where Vanhoye discusses the composition of the text, the Biblical context, and the interpretation of the text. The translations of the text appear to be Vanhoye's own (or at least his translator's) and seem rather wooden at times (e.g., 10:26 begins, "If voluntarily, indeed, we continue to sin..."). There is no effort put forth into discussing authorship or provenance, so far as I can tell, and very little attention given to socio-historical features.

Vanhoye's rhetorical analysis draws out many instances of synonymous, antithetic, and complementary parallelism, *inclusio*, *propositio*, chiasms, etc. He's a very astute observer of quotations and allusions to the OT, and at times he refers to exegetical techniques such as *qal wahomer*, but he doesn't seem to have transcended the lack of attention, development, and explanation of the author's exegetical techniques as well as the lack of in-depth interaction with his underlying LXX texts, that Susan Docherty noted in her *The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews: A Case Study in Early Jewish Bible Interpretation*. A commentary focused on rhetorical analysis seems as good a place as any to attempt to right these scholarly wrongs.

But perhaps we can attribute this to the overall feel of the commentary, which seems aimed at a more general audience of theologically inclined non-specialists (with *some* acquaintance with Greek and Hebrew) than scholars in particular. This would explain the general lack of features that we find in more technical commentaries (i.e., detailed exegesis of the Greek text, extensive use of Greek and Hebrew [which is there, but not in abundance], footnotes [which are few and far between], bibliography, and indices [there is a *very* limited index of authors, but that only shows the lack of interaction with others]).

The commentary itself is a mixed bag. Vanhoye's treatment of 1:1-14 is masterful, especially 1:5-14, where he expounds upon "the name" inherited in v. 4. He points out features of the passage that I had not previously noticed, such as the force of asking to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son." Angels were referred to as "sons of God" collectively in the OT, but no *one angel* in particular was ever referred to as God's Son (80). Vanhoye also does well to debunk the interpretation of 1:8 that would understand it as saying, "Your throne is God forever and ever." He says that this is "untenable, for it presents God as a seat on which the king is sitting! No

text in the Bible proposes this aberration” (83). He goes on to note that the title “God” is not reserved for God (= YHWH) alone, but it is used hyperbolically of humans, yet when it is applied to the risen Christ it “loses its hyperbolic character and becomes the expression of genuine reality” (84); a simple, yet effective line of argument, which he naturally expounds upon well past my brief summary.

I found myself wanting more out of his treatment of the so-called warning passages (2:1-4; 3:1—4:13; 5:11—6:20; 10:26-39; 12:14-29). Some receive more attention than others (e.g., 2:1-4 receives a 7 page treatment [91-98]; 12:14-29 a 16 page treatment [381-97]; while 6:4-8 [181-82] and 10:26-31 [319-20] each receive about a page), which is understandable, I guess, but it’s hard to pin him down on whether or not he believes that true believers can apostatize. For example, of 2:1-4 he says, “«Neglecting so great a salvation» obviously means consigning oneself to perdition” (96), but then goes on to say, “The preacher still does not say that it is a question of «eternal salvation»” (97). Presumably, as a Catholic, Vanhoye believes that apostasy is possible, but he never quite nails down what he thinks the author of Hebrews believed.

A couple of times I found Vanhoye to be a bit arrogant, as if better knew what the author meant than the author himself knew. For example, he charges the “preacher” with “clumsiness” for not perfectly fitting the rhetorical scheme that Vanhoye thinks he should (181). Perhaps the fault is Vanhoye’s in trying to force rhetoric on the text that isn’t there. Vanhoye later says that “The author imperfectly expresses himself” (220) in Hebrews 7:27. Vanhoye understands the wording here to be ambiguous and thinks that it can be construed to mean that Jesus offered up himself for his own sins, but as he goes on to note, “this interpretation is excluded because, because the beginning of the sentence affirms the innocence of the new high priest (26b) and because in 4,15 the absence of sin was pointed out” (220). So the allegedly imperfect expression could only be misunderstood out of context, but then again, what couldn’t be?

In the end I think that *A Different Priest* stands out as unique among other Hebrews commentaries. I can think of no other commentary that is devoted to rhetorical analysis above all else, and I certainly can’t think of one that is aimed at a more general audience of what I’d consider mid-level students (undergrads & well-read non-specialists who can handle a lexicon). The things that would help to improve this volume are indices. It desperately needs a Scripture/Ancient source index and a subject index would be incredibly helpful as well. I would have also appreciated a bit more decisiveness on some of the more controversial passages as I noted above. Still, I think this would make a welcome addition to the commentary user’s library.