

Albert Vanhoye. *A Different Priest: The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Miami: Convivium, 2011. 456 pages. \$25.99.

Originally written in Spanish and then translated into English, this book approaches the Letter to the Hebrews through rhetorical criticism. While most commentaries on Hebrews assume that the text might have been written as a sermon manuscript for a service of Christian worship, Vanhoye confidently presents the text as a unique case of “the complete text of a Christian sermon” (1:1–13:21) in the New Testament, “followed by a very short dispatch note” (13:22–25) (439). Through his thorough analysis of the rhetorical and oratorical elements of the text, Vanhoye claims that the particular literary style that is used from 1:1–13:21 in the Letter to the Hebrews should be categorized into a sermon, a distinctive literary genre, which corresponds to the stylistic characteristics of Semitic rhetoric rather than those of Graeco-Latin rhetoric.

According to Vanhoye’s critical analysis, the rhetorical style of Christian preaching used in the Letter to the Hebrews does not fit into any category of Graeco-Latin rhetoric. The sermon uses neither a style of a lawyer’s plea in a courtroom nor a demagogue’s speech for the persuasion of crowds, nor a logical statement on a topic in a linear order. But, the sermon is unique in the sense that it aims to nurture the listeners’ faith in God by helping them understand the theological foundation of the Christian faith. In order to accomplish this goal, the preacher uses remarkable rhetorical strategies that, Vanhoye thinks, make the sermon an excellent example of Christian preaching. One of the strategies that the preacher uses is to expound the theological meaning of the priesthood of Christ, not as an abstract theoretical concept, but as the foundation of the three Christian virtues—faith, hope, and charity—that are the guiding posts of the Christian way of living (326). Another rhetorical strategy that the preacher uses is that he skillfully crafts the sermon by inserting the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ into life, seamlessly, so that the sermon may carry both teaching and exhortation as integral parts. For this rhetorical strategy, the preacher uses distinctive oratorical devices of Semitic rhetoric such as diverse forms of parallelism, comparisons, and a circular composition design, which is quite different from that of Western rhetoric (440–441). Furthermore, the preacher is excellent in his choice of words, is knowledgeable in quoting passages from the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Pauline letters, and extra biblical sources, and is eloquent in paraphrasing them to support his theological perspective.

The twenty-one chapters of the book carefully examine these rhetorical elements in the text and demonstrate the uniqueness of Christian preaching shaped by Semitic rhetoric. The first chapter outlines the overall structure of the composition, following the Foreword, which briefly introduces the author as “an itinerary preacher” trained with “a complex, Judaeo-Hellenistic education” and the literary genre of the text as an “oral discourse” (19). The remaining twenty chapters are divided into five parts, following the thematic flow of the composition. Each chapter includes three sections: composition, biblical context, and interpretation. The composition section focuses on grammatical and structural analyses. It examines the use of various parallelisms, comparisons, and other forms of arrangement in the text and proves that the rhetorical style of the text is more Hebrew than Greek. The section of the biblical context investigates how other biblical and extra biblical texts are implicitly or explicitly related to the text to support the preacher to theologize what he addresses. The interpretation section provides the reader with some theological insight into reading the text. Through the interpretive notes, Vanhoye reminds the reader that the preacher emphasizes that the distinctiveness of the priesthood of Christ is that Christ as the high priest is “a form of mediation” (115) that should be understood from “the eschatological outlook” (417), which intersects our own lives to unite us to

Christ's sacrifice (420). For the preacher, this theological intersection is the foundation of Christian worship and preaching (13:8-16).

Some readers may be interested in speculating about the authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews or its original audience and historical and cultural contexts. Or, some readers may want ready-made meanings of the text. Vanhoye's book, however, will not satisfy such readers. His main concern in the book is to examine how the distinctive rhetorical and oratorical elements of Semitic rhetoric shaped the profound theology of Christian faith and how it was proclaimed through the distinctive literary genre of the sermon. Therefore, his book is a unique contribution to biblical rhetoric and Christian theology, and it will be a fascinating resource—rare and invaluable—for preachers and scholars of preaching.

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