

Albert Vanhoye, S.J.
The Letter to the Hebrews:
A New Commentary
Translated by Leo Arnold, S.J.

(New York: Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), softcover, v + 266 pp.

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Proof of the allure of the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews is evident in the increasing number of scholars venturing into the study of this mysterious first-century homily. Albert Vanhoye, a pioneering commentator on Hebrews, adds to an already accomplished body of work on the letter with a commentary that chiefly explicates the contours of the high priestly Christology of the epistle.

Vanhoye begins by engaging the principal literary and historical questions long associated with Hebrews in contemporary scholarship. Most notable is his proposal for an explicit personal connection between Hebrews and the Apostle Paul. The epistolary character of chapter thirteen, the personal reference to Timothy in that chapter, and the early association of Hebrews with Paul in the East suggest to Vanhoye that Paul plausibly wrote the concluding section of Hebrews (13:22-25) in order to offer his endorsement of Hebrews' theological assessment of Christ.

This proposal, while intriguing, is not persuasive. It is far less persuasive than claims about Paul's indirect connection to disputed letters such as Colossians. Whereas the personal presence of Paul—whether genuine or not—is made unmistakably clear by the time we arrive at the conclusion to Colossians, there is little in Hebrews 13:22-25 that signals the personality of Paul. If Paul did append to Hebrews a “dispatch note” as Vanhoye argues, then one would have to assume that he was being extremely subtle about it (p. 233). Further weakening Vanhoye's proposal is the absence of anything like Hebrews' high priestly Christology in the uncontested letters of Paul.

The main body of the commentary is divided into five sections. In the first three sections Vanhoye skillfully shows how the author of Hebrews progressively unfolds his unique portrait of Jesus. A key aspect of Vanhoye's argument is that the anonymous author of Hebrews slowly draws out the high priestly character of Jesus only after rehearsing the more traditional exaltation Christology derived from Psalm 110 (LXX 109). Vanhoye then turns his focus in sections four and

five of the commentary to the topic of how Hebrews' priestly christology is applied by the author to the task of the ethical and communal transformation of the original audience of the letter.

A real strength of the commentary is to be found in the detailed and profound theological reflection that Vanhoye brings to bear on the portrait of Christ as high priest. In particular, he takes seriously what seems to be a clear emphasis in the letter on the topic of the transformation of Jesus' humanity. This transformation has two components. On the one hand, Jesus' entrance into the heavenly sanctuary entails the transformation of his human body into a glorified, resurrected body. Although he did not qualify as a priest on earth, Jesus becomes a qualitatively different priest from the Temple priests for he effects a superior means of expiation as a consequence of the resurrection. Put another way, Jesus mediates God to humanity in the closest possible way by entering into God's presence with a transformed and glorified human body. On the other hand, Vanhoye points out that Christ's transformation entails the entire ethical dimension of Jesus' human career. According to Vanhoye, the human Jesus truly matured and developed in the sense that he responded to the prospect of suffering and death in a manner that demonstrated his radical openness and obedience to God. In other words, the human Jesus arrived at a state of sinlessness by the very personal ethical choices he made. On this reading, the resurrection of Jesus constitutes God's concrete honoring of the selfless character of Christ's human career.

With these reflections Vanhoye also provides an insightful construal of the concept of atonement as it appears in Hebrews. Atonement is achieved not simply as a result of Jesus' glorification or as a consequence of his death on the cross alone; instead, Vanhoye insists, the two events have to be connected. Without the living response of selflessness exemplified by Jesus throughout his human career the glorification of his body is not even possible. As Vanhoye notes well, it is "with terribly real events" that the process of atonement, which is brought ultimately to completion in God's presence, first begins (p.143). Such a balanced way of viewing the concept of atonement in Hebrews has the added virtue of complementing more recent contemporary studies that emphasize the role of life, as opposed to death, in ancient notions of sacrifice.

Vanhoye is less helpful when he ventures into the relationship between Hebrews and the symbolic world of the Hebrew Bible. While he helpfully displays how the anonymous author of Hebrews selectively appropriates Scripture, his observations sometimes strike an unfortunate tone of supersessionism. For example, employing problematic terminology, Vanhoye posits a troubling dichotomy between the Old Testament and the New Testament in terms of the idea of the availability of salvation which Vanhoye states is offered only in the latter (p. 71). Supersessionist comments especially emerge in his otherwise exegetically solid comments concerning the ubiquitous theme in Hebrews regarding Jesus' solidarity with humanity. One can fully appreciate the emphasis we see in Hebrews on the compassion of Jesus without contrasting it with a presentation of the Jewish high priesthood as characterized by separation and a lack of compassion. Problematic as well is Vanhoye's suggestion that authentic access to God, while

available to “Christians,” is unavailable in the “Old Testament” alone (p. 97). It is difficult to square such language with the renewed way of thinking about the relationship between contemporary Christianity and Judaism as expressed in such Vatican II documents as *Nostra Aetate*.

Even with these reservations, Vanhoye’s commentary can be recommended as a theologically rich exegetical treatment of Hebrews’ priestly Christology in general, and of Hebrews’ conception of the atonement specifically.