

Review of Christopher T. Holmes, *The Function of Sublime Rhetoric in Hebrews: A Study in Hebrews 12:18–29*, WUNT 2/465 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

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In this revision of the author's doctoral dissertation, Christopher T. Holmes argues that careful attention to the reflection on sublime rhetoric offered in the treatise *De sublimitate* can help clarify the interpretation of Heb 12:18–29. Holmes suggests that the “radical rhetoric” of Hebrews (and elsewhere in the New Testament) deals with authoritative proclamation and attempts to communicate religious truth and experience. These aspects of religion are ultimately beyond rational, human comprehension. This kind of rhetoric, therefore, overlaps with, but also extends well beyond, the persuasive rhetoric common in the rhetorical handbooks of the ancient world. Sublime rhetoric aims to move its intended audience by tapping and shaping religious experience, which involves far more than, and at times something other than, rational persuasion. Attention to sublime rhetoric can therefore help illuminate the intended effects of Heb 12:18–29's style and imagery without reducing these aspects of the passage to ornamentation, and/or without imagining that the meaning and persuasive power of the text are adequately accounted for when reduced to linear arguments and rational propositions. Holmes ultimately argues that the sublime rhetoric of Heb 12:18–29 intends to motivate the original audience, even in the face of persecution, to continue in their commitment to Jesus, particularly as this involves gathering together in worship. Hebrews' sublime rhetoric enables the audience to experience their gatherings for worship as the awesome and terrifying space where they hear and can respond to God speaking to them. As such, Hebrews aims to dislocate the audience so that they can transcend the world of their time and space and can live into the new and different, divine reality of the world of the text.

The volume consists of six chapters. Holmes begins with a brief discussion of Heb 12:18–29 aimed at spotlighting some of the rhetorical, stylistic and contextual concerns that justify the study. Holmes pays particular attention to the importance in this passage of God's speech at two different mountains, as well as to the different responses God's speech elicits among those who hear it. These verses, he argues, belong in the larger discourse of the epistle, but also stand apart, particularly because of their distinctive style. This discussion is followed by a useful literature review. Holmes demonstrates that few have given sufficient attention to the rhetorical and stylistic elements of these verses (i.e., its sublime rhetoric) in relation to their function within Hebrews (a lack of attention is largely due to the prevailing assumption that the form of the passage is not highly relevant to its function/message). Fewer still have reflected on another of the concerns of Holmes' study, the effect that the language and imagery of this passage was likely intended to produce on the original audience. Sublime rhetoric, as Holmes goes on to argue, pays attention to the capacity of language to move auditors to an experience wherein they transcend the mundane world and enter another realm.

In the second chapter, Holmes introduces the treatise *De sublimitate* and the concept of the sublime in ancient and modern discourse. The discussion of the treatise includes a brief survey of questions about authorship (unknown, though Holmes refers to him as Longinus for the sake of convenience) and date (probably first century CE, though not of major importance since Holmes

does not argue for any dependence of Hebrews on the treatise), as well as an overview of relevant contents. *De sublimitate* considers five sources of sublime rhetoric (Holmes' rendering of ὑψος) and discusses their effects: impressive ideas, strong emotion, fitting figures of thought and speech, elevated diction, and superior sentence construction. When these sources are rightly drawn upon and put into language by way of various figures and techniques, this sublime rhetoric can cause hearers to forget themselves and transcend their critical, rational faculties. The audience can be moved outside of themselves. Sublime rhetoric can stir, inspire, transport and surprise listeners, awakening wonder within them and jolting them out of moral torpor. For Longinus, sublime rhetoric is not about a manner of writing, but about the quality or capacity of a text "to lead to *ekstasis*; [sublime rhetoric] aims at the dislocation of the hearers from their immediate setting into another world and from apathy to further progress" (p. 78). It is, therefore, also a tool for moral transformation.

The third chapter reflects on sublime rhetoric in its ancient context by comparing and contrasting *De sublimitate* with other ancient discussions of style, rhetoric and the power of language (e.g., Gorgias, Plato, Aristotle, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero, Plutarch, Philo). Holmes demonstrates that while *De sublimitate* shares a great deal with other ancient discussions of rhetoric, it especially stands apart in its celebration of the power of emotion and its aim to transcend persuasion, where this is viewed primarily as a function of rational faculties. Sublime rhetoric is anything but dispassionate, reasoned discourse. The treatise is also unusual in the extent to which it emphasizes both the effects of sublime rhetoric and the positive role such rhetoric can play in moral formation. In contrast with much ancient reflection on rhetoric and persuasion, sublime rhetoric intends to foreclose reasoned deliberation. It is, therefore, particularly suited for the transcendent realities and experiences of religious discourse.

Chapters four and five analyze Heb 12:18–29 in the light of the preceding discussion of sublime rhetoric. In chapter four, Holmes offers an exegesis of the passage with a view to showing how elements of its style and form show similarities with elements of sublime rhetoric identified in *De sublimitate*. Holmes therefore notes aspects of the text such as the staccato rhythm in the description of Sinai/Horeb in vv. 18–19, a rhythm created by the use of a string of two and three syllable words all linked by καί. He also points to features such as the passage's heightened emotive force (amplified by, for instance, the use of periphrasis by not naming Sinai/Horeb, the depiction of Moses' terror, the use of imperatives, and the description of God as a consuming fire), vivid imagery and vocabulary (so, e.g., myriads of angels, shaking of creation, emphasis on reverence and awe), and jarring sentence structures. This use of language helps dislocate the audience by drawing them into the scenes, but it also emphasizes both the awesome power of God's speech and the location of this speaking. The style and form of the passage are, Holmes argues, bound together with its function. That is to say, the "view of life" (Holmes takes the phrase from Martha Nussbaum) presented by the passage cannot be paraphrased or reduced to propositions. The sublime rhetoric of these verses is an irreducible part of its meaning.

Chapter five explores the function of these verses arguing that the passage aims to dislocate and to stir the audience in order to move from their place of complacency to the mountain where God speaks. The goal is commensurate with the rhetoric employed, for the rhetoric enables the

audience to imagine and experience their earthly gatherings for worship as the heavenly space where God speaks. Additionally, Hebrews' use of sublime rhetoric seeks to jolt the audience out of their sluggishness and apathy. Their empirical gatherings bring them to the terrifying yet joyful heavenly Mount Zion where they hear and can respond to God's speech. The rhetoric also aims to shape communal life. The ethical exhortations of chapter 13 can, therefore, be seen to fit well with the larger discourse. Holmes argues further that while Heb 12:18–29 occupies the climatic place in the epistle, other aspects of Hebrews, such as the extended wilderness metaphor in Heb 3–4 and the call to go outside the camp in 13:13, also participate in the overall goal of dislocating the audience so that they will be continually moving towards the place where God speaks. Indeed, the effectiveness of Hebrews' wandering motif is, Holmes suggests, more clearly understood when viewed in the light of the text's sublime rhetoric. Hebrews intends to help the audience refocus their attention on the things that really matter and to move them thereby to live more fully into the symbolic world of the text. By enabling them to imagine and experience the mundane act of gathering for worship as entering heavenly space where they hear and respond to God's speech, the sublime rhetoric of Hebrews encourages and compels the audience to endure in their commitment to participate in the communal gatherings and to keep moving towards that place where God speaks.

The conclusion of the volume, chapter six, offers a helpful summary of the main lines of the argument and lays out some of the implications that follow from the thesis. Holmes reiterates, among other implications, that the radical or religious rhetoric of the New Testament does not seek to persuade by means of logic and proposition. It aims to reshape perceptions of reality and fire the imagination of those who encounter it such that they can live into a new and different world, a world mediated (perhaps created?) by the rhetoric of the texts themselves. New Testament scholars need to be more attuned to these dynamics and attention to *De sublimitate* can offer some help in this regard. The particular use of sublime rhetoric in Hebrews implies further that the author is not so worried about wrong belief or propositions. From the perspective of Hebrews' sublime rhetoric, the problem the audience faces is more likely to be that of hardship on account of their participation in communal gatherings. This problem is not addressed by an appeal to dispassionate logic, but by forceful, emotional, vivid language that recasts mundane experience of the communal meetings in terms of (ultimately incommunicable) divine realities. Because sublime rhetoric can lead to ecstatic, religious experience, Holmes also suggests that attention to sublime rhetoric can shed light on the dynamics of textually-mediated religious experiences. This leads him to make a final point about some of the recent studies that have argued that Hebrews is best understood in terms of Jewish mysticism. For Holmes, this is a mistake because such a move focuses too much attention on the world outside the text. Attention to sublime rhetoric, by way of contrast, puts the emphasis on the text and the world the text creates.

Holmes' monograph offers a useful survey of *De sublimitate* that will doubtless prove beneficial in the wider guild. He makes a plausible case that *De sublimitate* describes rhetoric in ways that set it apart from much other ancient reflection on rhetoric. Moreover, his arguments that too much New Testament exegesis, even when it looks at rhetorical features in these documents, focuses primarily on the rational, persuasive force of textual arguments while tending to ignore

the ways that the form and style of some of those arguments aimed to effect ancient audiences are important and worthy of reflection. He also rightly highlights problems with the tendency in Hebrews' scholarship to make the issue of structure/arrangement the key to the homily's communicative effectiveness, as if everything rests primarily on the author's appropriation of "formal elements of arrangement found in ancient handbooks" (p. 19). His careful attention to the ways that Heb 12:18–29 function to move and stir its readers/hearers to persevere in meeting together because this is a means for them to hear God's speech and experience divine realities rightly recognizes that this passage intends to shape the audience's imagination and experience in the present. There is much to commend this thoughtful and well-written volume.

The argument does, however, raise a number of questions. I address only one general area of discussion here. I wonder how this account of Hebrews' rhetoric fits with the text's eschatological concerns. More specifically, it seems at times that Holmes' account of Hebrews' sublime rhetoric, particularly as he seeks to focus on the world of the text and *not* the world outside the text, risks reducing Hebrews' eschatology to ecstatic, religious experience. This appears all the more to be the case insofar as the argument emphasizes those passages in Hebrews that speak in terms of moving into God's presence. Holmes' study stands in many ways in the interpretive shadow of Käsemann. But wandering or moving towards "heaven" is not the only directional or spatial focus in Hebrews. What about those passages that speak in more static terms by calling for patience (e.g., 6:11–15; 9:28), or that encourage the audience with promises of realities that they will inherit (1:14; 6:12), or that are expected to come to them (2:5; 6:5; 10:37; 13:14)? Speaking in general terms, Hebrews seems to stress movement into God's presence primarily when discussing the audience's present reality (a point that fits well with Holmes' argument), but future hopes are generally spoken of not in terms of motion forward or into, but in terms of waiting and of reception. It would be interesting to see how Holmes' thesis would incorporate this other perspective, particularly as this eschatological aspect seems to imply some notion of a reality outside the text, including Jesus himself (9:28; 10:37), that will come to those who are waiting for it. Whether or not approaches to Hebrews that emphasize Jewish mysticism are correct, it seems that Hebrews' eschatological emphases entail more than just a living into the world of the text. Hebrews is not, it seems to me at least, a form of early Christian existentialism. Tangentially, Holmes speaks at a few points of Hebrews envisioning "the absolute removal ... of all that has been made" (p. 148; see also 158). This interpretation of 12:26 raises interesting questions about the author's cosmological and especially anthropological commitments (are humans to be destroyed, or do they consist of something, à la Plato, that is not itself created?), about which it would be interesting to hear more.

Holmes' monograph makes an important contribution to the study of Hebrews, particularly as it challenges interpreters to reflect on what the effects of the text's rhetoric must have been like to those who first heard the sermon read aloud. I suspect his work will go some way towards reinvigorating conversation around how this epistle might continue to be meaningfully engaged in classrooms and congregations today.