

Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews.
By David A. DeSilva. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000. 460 pp.
Paper. \$40.00.

This is a book that can most aptly be described as a “glorious ruin.” It is “glorious” because it attempts to interpret the book of Hebrews both from a perspective that is exegetical, and one which also reveals vital information from the first century regarding the rhetorical and social styles of communication. Dr. DeSilva, associate professor of NT and Greek at Ashland Theological Seminary, provides a wealth of background information as well as the normal discussion and debate regarding the author of Hebrews. However, at this point, Dr. DeSilva moves on to fresh territory that is often uninhabited by commentators on the Book of Hebrews. This commentary contains a wonderful explanation of first century rhetoric and the strategies of communication under the rubric of socio-rhetorical analysis. DeSilva pays homage to Ben Witherington III for leading the way in this new field of study in his commentaries on Galatians, First and Second Corinthians, and the Book of Acts.

By the author’s own admission, the commentary itself is highly dependent and indebted to the massive works produced by William Lane, Harold Attridge, and Paul Ellingworth. Each of these commentators have written magisterial commentaries on the Book of Hebrews. It is from their baseline of study that DeSilva makes an original contribution of the socio-rhetorical devices utilized in Hebrews. In this vein the author provides an excellent definition and description of the three genres of oratory, the five stages of speech making and the three kinds of proof, as well as the classical structure and outline arrangement of speech found in rhetorical genre. Hence, his conclusion is that the Book of Hebrews follows a deliberative rhetorical pattern that not only is attributed to the divine author but clearly reflects the human author and perhaps more largely the socio-rhetorical community in which the author of Hebrews was entrenched.

There is also a section on the persuasion and motivational aspects of speech and rhetoric which are only natural in a “brief word of exhortation.” Some of this ground has been anticipated by Johnson in his work on the *Pilgrim Motif in the Book of Hebrews*. But there is no slight in saying that DeSilva, although having built from the groundwork of many authors, has constructed a masterpiece of commentary literature on Hebrews. Standing on the shoulders of giants, one can truly see farther.

Although the book is glorious in many respects, it is unfortunate that it can also be defined as a “ruin.” Unfortunately, DeSilva attempts to walk both sides of the street, although not very convincingly, in regard to the theology of the book. In his description of the “warning passages” he attempts, via the language of the text, to leave open the possibility of believers being able to fall or apostatize. However, in the details of his text he clearly aligns himself with the typical Reformed theological interpretation with its attending “perseverance of the saints” doctrine. (This seems to follow the classic experimental predestinational reflex reaction so aptly described by R. T. Kendall in *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*; *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, by Charles Bell; as well as by Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Doctrine of Assurance*.) Although the book pushes for the perseverance of the saints throughout all five warning sections, it is still valuable.

The author seems to be somewhat unfamiliar with the wealth of literature that has been written both at the scholarly and lay levels regarding the view that the audience in the warning passages are believers. The fine works of Robert Govett, G. H. Lang, R. E. Neighbor, and Philip Mauro, as well as contemporary authors including, Zane Hodges, Earl Radmacher, Jody Dillow, Bob Wilkin, and Charlie Bing seem to elude DeSilva. However, the author is familiar with one “grace” advocate, Dr. Kem Oberholtzer. DeSilva interacts quite extensively (seven pages total) with five articles that were written by Dr. Oberholtzer (*Bibliotheca Sacra* Jan-Mar 1988 through Jan-Mar 1989). Although this reviewer does not agree with DeSilva’s methodology or his conclusions, the fact is that he is at least willing to engage in discussion and debate with the

traditional grace position. Unfortunately, the author does not deal with the nature of the term “salvation” nor with the concept of the *metochoi* found repeatedly in the book, nor even with the concept of “the house of God” found in chapters 3, 8, and 10.

This book is well indexed both by Scripture and extra-biblical sources required by a work of this nature. There is also an excellent author index. This commentary is essential for those who desire to understand the Book of Hebrews with its rich backdrop of rhetorical and sociological information. It is also essential in helping to understand the Reformed position from a slightly different angle, as well as the discussion and defense against the grace position by those who hold to Reformed Theology based on its latest scholarship.

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