A Fresh Look at Old Letters: Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

With this subject, I am taking you along on my own recent learning experience. Socio-rhetorical criticism is a relatively new approach in biblical studies, and I have taken some time to get to know it better. Admittedly, the term “criticism” is unfortunate, because of its negative connotation in everyday language. No such negative bias is necessarily implied in the various forms of criticism used in the study of the Bible such as source criticism or redaction criticism. The term “assessment” or “analysis” would therefore have been more appropriate, but I am afraid it is too late to change this. We are dealing with an analysis of the text from a particular angle, in this case a social and rhetorical one.

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The social angle. This is not quite the same as taking the historical background of the document into account, although there is significant overlap. In general, history tends more toward ‘big events’ and important people. The social science perspective on the other hand is interested in how life works (or worked) on all levels of society. Since we are looking at the past, this can also be called social history, which makes clear it has this more specialised interest.

The rhetorical angle. Rhetorical skill was highly valued in the ancient world and treated as a veritable science. There were clear rules and principles defining how one did rhetoric well (more on this later). Learning these was a crucial part of a good education. It is increasingly recognized that the New Testament contains many examples of the use of classical rhetorical devices. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and the NT writers were certainly out to persuade their audience; in this, they did not hesitate to use the rhetorical means they knew.

Since rhetoric was such an important aspect of social life in the ancient world, it makes sense to combine the two: socio-rhetorical.

The oral angle. To these two we can add the oral aspect. An estimated 80-90% of the population was not able to read (Witherington 2009:7); they needed someone to read to them. Written texts were not meant to be read in private anyway, but to be read out loud and often in public. They were the next best thing to being present and speaking one’s mind in person: “They are mostly surrogates for oral communication” (*ibid*.:4; see also Witherington 2012 and Rev. 1:1-3). They are “oral texts,” which “is not an oxymoron,” that is, not a combination of contradictory elements (Witherington 2012). This is especially true for Paul’s letters; they had to replace the apostle when he could not speak to his audience directly.

Letters of the length that Paul wrote were actually quite rare at the time. They have more in common with the practice of public speaking and rhetoric than with the first-century practice of letter writing. As Witherington (2009:10) points out, this is even truer for 1 John and Hebrews, which are not letters at all, but written sermons. The closest we get outside of the Bible is the letters of Cicero, written in the first century BC. Whereas rhetoric already was an ancient art at that time, Cicero’s literary letters appear to have been an innovation: like most biblical letters, they, too, do not fit the normal mould. Again, “letter” is not the right category; what we are dealing with in both cases looks more like written speeches.

To be fair, at the beginning and the end of most biblical letters we do find those elements that were typical

for ancient letters. But what happens in between the opening and the closing remarks, that is, in the body of the letter, has little or nothing to do with ancient letter writing, but everything with ancient rhetoric (with the exception of a few 'real' letters, such as 2nd and 3rd John). A phrase like "I want you to know" or "I appeal to you" would be a familiar introduction used in rhetoric, but not in letter writing (so Witherington 2012), to give just two indications that rhetoric is the better category for what we are looking at in these so-called 'letters'.

In our day and age Paul might have made a recording, done a YouTube video, or used a platform for web conferencing. Instead, he had to make do with letters, preferably letters he could send through a trusted person or co-worker. The carrier of a letter would presumably also be the one to present it, orally, to its recipients. In this case, it made a big difference if Paul could have clarified the content and given instructions to the carrier on how to present it or at least on what he meant. This would almost be a necessity considering this:

> A standard letter in Greek would have no separation of words, sentences, paragraphs, or the like; little or no punctuation; and all capital letters. Thus, for example, imagine having to sort out a document that began as follows:
>
> PAULASERVANTOFCHRISTJESUSCALLEDTOBEANAPOSTLEANDSETAPARTF
>
> ORTHEGOSPELOFGOD.
>
> The only way to decipher such a collection of letters was to sound them out – out loud! (*Ibid*.:8)

The letters we find in the NT are mostly far longer than secular letters of their era. Actually they are *not mainly letters*, although they have epistolary openings and closings sometimes. They are discourses, homilies, and rhetorical speeches of various sorts that the creators could not deliver personally to a particular audience, so instead they sent a surrogate to proclaim them. These documents would not be handed to just anyone. From what we can tell, Paul expected one of his co-workers, such as Timothy, Titus, or Phoebe, to go and orally deliver the contents of the document in a rhetorically effective manner. This would have been almost a necessity because the document would come without division of words or punctuation, so only someone skilled in reading such seamless prose in *scriptum continuum*—indeed, one who *already knew* the contents of the document—could place the emphases in the right places so as to communicate the message effectively. (*Ibid*.:9)

Paul the Rhetorician

In spite of Paul's denial of using rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and the Corinthian complaint about Paul's poor rhetorical skills as reflected in 2 Corinthians, he seems to have been an excellent rhetorician. He frequently makes use of rhetorical devices in his letters, first and foremost in Romans and – ironically – in the Corinthian epistles. He must have held back on the use of rhetoric while in Corinth in order to distinguish himself and his message from travelling teachers of wisdom and rhetoric, often of a more dubious kind. But in his writings he shows himself a master of the art. Paul grew up in just the right place for this. The Greek geographer Strabo (ca. 63 BC-AD 24) notes that the inhabitants of Tarsus displayed great love for learning and education, surpassing Athens and Alexandria in this respect; several well-known Stoic philosophers were natives of Tarsus (*Geography* 14.5.13-14).

A few issues back I wrote on Romans 7 and Paul's use of impersonation; although he speaks in the I-form, this is not his personal experience, but that of the Israelites coming under the law at Mount Sinai (you can read about this here). It is easy to miss this when you are just reading the text, but a good presenter (for Romans, it was actually a woman, Phoebe) could have made it very clear that she was stepping into a role, not speaking for or as the author, but as someone else. Since the use of impersonation was not unusual in first-century rhetoric, Paul's original audience would have been equipped to pick up what was happening.

Something similar applies to Paul's frequent use of rhetorical questions in Romans (I counted roughly 75 questions in the book) and his providing answers to imagined opponents, who on occasion speak back to him (e.g. Rom. 2:1; Rom. 6:1; Rom. 9:18-21) – all established ploys in the rhetoric of the day (the technical term would have been *diatribe*), and ploys that would gain tremendously by being skilfully presented by a performer.

Ancient Rhetoric

So far, we have noted rhetorical questions, diatribe, impersonation and other micro level elements of ancient rhetoric. The influence of rhetorical theory and practice is also visible in structure, on the macro level. So let's take a brief look at the main points of ancient rhetorical theory.

According to the theory, there were three kinds or branches of rhetoric:

- **Forensic** rhetoric focused on the past. Its aim was to come to a verdict. Its main use was therefore in the court room. For this reason, it is less relevant for biblical studies.
- **Deliberative** rhetoric focused on the future. Its objective was to come to a judgment or decision. In other words, a particular course of action would be its aim. This matches the aim of many New Testament letters.
- **Epideictic** rhetoric presents praise or blame, and is at home on occasions like funerals, anniversaries, birthdays, official receptions, and festivals. Examples in the New Testament include Ephesians, 1st Corinthians 13, 1st Thessalonians, and Hebrews 11.

In order to be persuasive, three things were deemed important:

- **Logos**: the appeal to logic, using arguments and illustrations.
- **Pathos**: the appeal to the emotions. Arousing or appealing to emotions was particularly important towards the end, when it came to summing up the argument.
- **Ethos** means something close to character. It involves moral authority, expertise, and competency *as perceived by the audience*. For this reason it was important to establish one's authority and build rapport with the audience right from the start, something that Paul usually does in his letters

It was common to distinguish six parts or components in the structure of a speech. They are known by their Latin names, which I will include here, so you have seen them at least this once; all of these can be identified in various New Testament documents:

- **Exordium**: the introduction. Here, it is important to establish rapport with the audience as well as one's authority. It is also the place to introduce or hint at the main themes. This is of course

precisely what Paul does at the beginning of all his letters. For an example, see 1st Corinthians 1:5-9.

- **Narratio**: statement of the facts, often in the form of narrative. For an example, see 1st Corinthians 1:11-17
- **Propositio**: the thesis. An outstanding example is Romans 1:16f, which follows the narratio in the preceding verses and sums up what Paul will argue. See also 1st Corinthians 1:10 (ESV), "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."
- **Probatio** (also confirmatio): evidence and arguments. This is where the appeal to logic plays a main role. We find it in the body or main part of Paul's letters.
- **Refutatio**: counterarguments. The speaker identifies alternatives and seeks to disprove them. This element is not always present. In Romans it appears on several occasions spread out through the letter.
- **Peroratio**: the conclusion. This includes recapitulation of the argument and an appeal to the emotions.

By the way, I have focused on Paul here, but probably the most brilliant piece of rhetoric in the New Testament is the letter to the Hebrews. It displays quite a few elements of the art. For one, its main part brilliantly applies the technique of *synkrisis*, making one's point through a detailed comparison of one thing with another. But perhaps that will have to be the subject for another issue of Create a Learning Site!

The study of ancient rhetoric is not merely of academic interest; it can make a real contribution to biblical studies, and it can make a real difference. Witness this final quote:

> We could have avoided dealing with all of those long and lugubrious arguments about how those two letters [meant are Ephesians and Colossians] couldn't possibly be by Paul because they sound different, have different sentence structures, use different vocabulary and so on had someone paid attention to the fact that these letters are written according to the style of Asiatic rhetoric, the most verbose and hyperbolic form of first century rhetoric. This was entirely appropriate since Paul was writing to the very region where such a rhetorical style was most popular and had originated— the province of Asia. Paul as a skillful rhetorician was able to vary his style according to the audience, and he does so in these documents. Twenty-six line long sentences with lots of adjectives and even some redundancies are no problem in Asiatic rhetoric, as anyone who has read the verbose Nimrud dag stele, in praise of a ruler, will know. As Luke Johnson has said in various of his commentaries, changing of style was a common rhetorical tactic to be persuasive to differing audiences. It's not a matter of different authors. It's a matter of flexibility in rhetoric. (Witherington 2012)

So what do you make of this? Leave a comment

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