# How Ancient Rhetoric Helps Us to Understand the Bible Better (II)

For April of this year I dedicated a post issue to the subject of socio-rhetorical criticism. One fascinating take- away from that exercise was the realization that most NT letters are not really letters as much as they are speeches or discourses of various kinds. They had to be put in writing because their author could not be physically present with his audience. They are still speeches, however, meant to be presented to the audience orally, usually by a trusted letter carrier. They therefore follow the conventions of public speaking, not of letter writing, which anyway was nowhere near as developed as the ancient art of speaking well. Knowing a little bit about the practice of rhetoric in the ancient world opens a whole new window on what is happening in these “letters”.

That April write-up was originally a brief input I gave during the European SBS & BCC Consultation in Switzerland earlier this year. During the discussion time following the presentation someone asked a brilliant question: So what about the Gospels? Do we find something similar there?

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Fact is, I had no clue (how's that for being prepared for the obvious, really-to-be-expected questions in a lecture?). So obviously rhetorical criticism is a subject I have to revisit, which is what I am doing this month. I found substantial help in a different book by Ben Witherington III from the one I used for that previous issue, which is a significant source for what follows: *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament*.

So do we find ancient rhetoric in the gospels? The short answer is yes, but. The "but" has to do with genre. Gospels are something entirely different from written or spoken discourses. They are above all narratives. For this reason we do not find the kind of structure we discovered in many letters ("macro-rhetoric" in Witherington). This structure is well-known from ancient speeches and lecture books on rhetoric. It starts with the exordium (introduction) and finishes with the peroratio (conclusion and appeal). We do not find this in the gospels.

However, the gospels do aim to persuade their readers as to the character and identity of Jesus. Naturally, therefore, they do use the finer "micro"-tools and devices of ancient rhetorical skill.

## Gospel of Mark

Witherington uses the Gospel of Mark to demonstrate this use of what he calls "micro-rhetoric". He presents Mark as a simple guy, who shows nothing like the rhetorical sophistication of someone like Paul, but who nevertheless shows that he has learned to apply some of the more basic tools.

One of these is what in Greek is called *chreia*: a short story or anecdote about someone. It could be as short as one sentence. Writing such stories, adding personal reflection and comments, was an important and foundational exercise in formal education, before the student could move on to more substantial training in rhetoric. Related forms include the fable (a short story in which animals, not people, play the main role) and the parable. A parable is an implicit comparison between two situations. Parables also could be just one sentence long or they could be more extensive stories. The most basic training in rhetoric also included writing simple parables.

Obviously, a substantial part of Mark's gospel consists of these kinds of stories. Ideally, they would be short and memorable, with a clear punchline or pithy saying, which Mark succeeds in doing. The gospel of Mark is rhetorically simple, corresponding to beginners' level, but it is effective.

## Gospel of Luke

Luke is a completely different story (pun intended). For one, Luke displays a high level of linguistic and rhetorical skill. His Greek and his style are far more cultured than that of Mark. It had to be, of course, because he is dedicating his two-volume work (Luke's gospel and Acts belong together) to what appears to be an upper-class Roman, Theophilus.

In addition, as Witherington points out, Luke is not simply telling the story of Jesus, although he is doing that as well. In his statement of purpose in Luke 1:1-4, Luke does not refer to Jesus as his subject, but to “things that have happened.” In other words, where Mark writes biography (so Witherington), Luke writes history: salvation history, to be precise: how God intervenes and operates in world history to solve our mess and rescue his creation.

[As an aside, I am not entirely sure what to make of this clear distinction between Mark as biography and Luke as history. The bulk of both consists of similar short stories (*chreia*) about Jesus. Unfortunately, Witherington does not say anything about Matthew in *New Testament Rhetoric*. This gospel has more of a didactic edge; it presents teaching or instruction concerning Jesus, making it a discipleship manual. But it still looks a lot like Mark and Luke. So I find it hard to put Luke’s gospel into an entirely different category. Still, I do see the point that the obvious connection of Luke with Acts as one work gives the biography of Jesus a place in a larger context and thereby a bigger purpose.]

Anyway, according to Witherington, Luke is a historian more than a biographer. The history he writes wants more than simply to convey accurate information about the past. Ancient historians usually sought to persuade their audience in one way or another, and so does Luke. They were also expected to bring out the meaning of the events they described. Witherington shows how Luke goes on to write exactly what the Greeks thought good and rhetorically effective history should look like.

## Book of Acts

This discussion of Luke makes clear that we also have to consider the second part of his historical writing: the book of Acts. Witherington devotes an entire chapter to this book. It is here that I uncovered the real surprise for this month. This chapter does for Acts what we have already done for Paul’s letters: it opens a whole new window on the book.

Here is a fascinating statistic: well over one third of Acts consists of speeches, conversations, debates, and legal proceedings. This is where rhetorical analysis makes a major contribution to understanding what is going on. One way Luke’s skill shines through is the way in which he captures the difference in form and style of the speeches, depending on speaker, audience, and context. One example: when in a Jewish context, the speech takes on an OT style, as in Luke 1-2 and Acts 2 – very different from Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17).

Most or all discourses in Acts are speech summaries, since the original would no doubt have been more extensive, sometimes substantially so (e.g. Acts 2:40). All the longer speeches follow the rhetorical conventions and structure of the ancient world. Especially with Paul, they show remarkable rhetorical skill and sophistication.

We find in Acts both deliberative rhetoric, where the speaker is seeking to persuade his audience to a particular course of action, usually repentance, as well as forensic rhetoric, the rhetoric of the law court, used by Peter, Stephen, and Paul when they have to defend themselves in front of authorities.

Acts 2 for instance clearly is a forensic speech, first using the language of defence (Acts 2:14-21), because the disciples have just been accused of drunkenness, and then of accusation or confrontation (Acts 2:22-36), since it is really de audience who is in the wrong. In Acts 2:38-40 the speech briefly turns

deliberative, because Peter now urges his audience to a particular course of action: repent and be baptised! Presumably, much of the continuation (implied in Acts 2:40) would have been deliberative as well.

Witherington goes to some length to analyse several of these speeches with a fair measure of detail. I am not going to summarise all this here, but I would like to give you Witherington's macro-rhetorical structure for three speeches, or rather speech summaries. I encourage you to open the Bible and see if this structural analysis makes sense to you!

Acts 7 is the longest speech in Acts and it is easy to get lost in the long recounting of Israel's history. Stephen uses the rhetorical device called *insinuatio* (Lat.: entrance through a narrow or crooked way). At first, he aims to win over his audience, gain their sympathy. For a long time there are only indirect hints as to where he is going with this; it is only toward the end that he comes out with a direct and strong rebuke. This strategy makes sense, because he is facing a hostile audience and he must assume they are unwilling to hear his real message. So Stephen does a lot of ground laying before he gets to the point. Witherington dissects the structure as follows:

- Exordium (introduction) Acts 7:2a
- Narratio (facts) Acts 7:2b-34
- Propositio (thesis) Acts 7:35
- Probatio (arguments) Acts 7:36-50
- Peroratio (conclusion and appeal) Acts 7:51-53

Much more than this can be said (for instance, Stephen keeps pointing out that God is not limited to one land, much less to the temple), but not less: the speech has a clear and conventional rhetorical structure.

In Acts 13, Paul addresses a Jewish synagogue congregation:

- Exordium (introduction) Acts 13:16
- Narratio (facts) Acts 13:17-25
- Propositio (thesis) Acts 13:26 (it is not Acts 13:23, although this is close and certainly makes for a bold statement; what Paul seeks to prove is not that "God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised," but that this message is sent to them)
- Probatio (arguments) Acts 13:27-37
- Peroratio (conclusion and appeal) Acts 13:38-41

Although Acts 26 is spoken in a forensic (legal) context, Paul's real aim is deliberative: to get these rulers to believe.

- Exordium (introduction) Acts 26:2-3
- Narratio (facts) Acts 26:4-21
- Propositio (thesis) Acts 26:22-23
- Probatio (arguments) is left out; there is not really a need for it, perhaps, since Agrippa knew very well what Paul was talking about, and the context provides a measure of evidence
- Refutatio (disproving alternatives) Acts 26:25-26
- Peroratio (conclusion and appeal) Acts 26:27, 29

The insights in Witherington's book go far beyond structure. Before I finish with a thought on application, let

me give one example of this. In Acts 22:30-23:10, Paul's initial hearing takes place. Paul manages to create quite a stir by blurting out a confession of faith in the resurrection of the dead. Since the members of the Jewish Council include both Pharisees and Sadducees, this is a contentious subject; Sadducees did no share this belief. And sure enough, the accusers get into a fierce fight among themselves.

So is this a clever ploy used by Paul to divide his opponents? Witherington argues it is not. Paul's action is ultimately aiming at the Roman official, not his opponents. These opponents have no real power to decide anything, after all, but the official does. At stake is what is at stake: defining what the accusation is. Does Paul promote a new king (in the eyes of Rome a serious political crime) or is this an obscure Jewish quarrel about such abstruse ideas as resurrection of the dead? The latter of course would be considered irrelevant by Roman officials. So is it about revolution and revolt or about obscure Jewish doctrines?

Paul succeeds in defining the terms of his trial, as the letter written by the presiding official to the Roman governor in Caesarea makes clear: "I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment" (Acts 23:29).

## So what?

So clever use of rhetoric can save your life. Is there anything else we can take away from this?

Both Mark and Luke provide us with a model, as do the various speakers in Acts. Each of them used the standard rhetorical skills of their world, and each of them did this according to their own level of proficiency. Here is a different phrase to refer to this, perhaps more fitting to our own time:

They model versatility in the use of media to share and publish the story of Jesus.

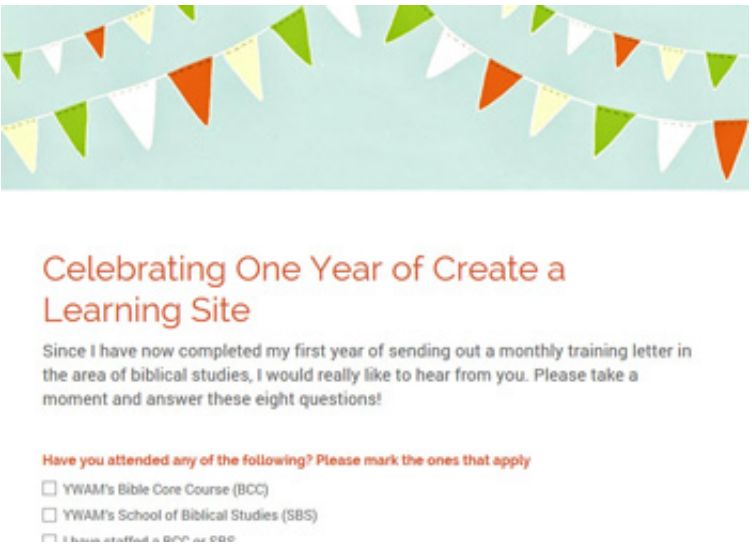
Maybe the following sites give a taste of what this might look like in the 21st century:

http://www.createinternational.com/the-vision/

http://player.vimeo.com/video/111894073

http://www.endbiblepovertynow.com/

So what are you doing on Facebook and YouTube? Will you sign the commitment at endbiblepovertynow.com? **Leave a comment!**




## In Closing: The Questionnaire – PDF and Sharing Buttons

Many thanks to all those who responded to my request for feedback two months ago! What probably surprised me the most was the wide spread in people's favourite issues. There was no clear winner, and each issue was mentioned by at least some. I added your proposals for future issues to my list, but it may be a while until I get to them: together with my own ideas, the list is quite long and not getting shorter!

Two immediate results for the website are:

1. At the bottom of each post on the website there now is a button to convert the text into a PDF-file and save it to your computer.

2. I have replaced the "sharing" buttons on the website, and they should work now (many thanks to you if you pointed this malfunction out to me!). You find them all the way down after each post. The "sharing" buttons at the end of the monthly e-mails should work as well.

In case you are not aware of this: these buttons allow for easy sharing for instance on Facebook. So if you like what you are reading, you can use one or more of these to share it with your friends!

## References

*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society, 2001)

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Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009)

Disclosure of Material Connection: Some of the links in the post above are “affiliate links.” This means if you click on the link and purchase the item, I will receive an affiliate commission. If you purchase anything through such a link, you help me cover the cost of Create a Learning Site.

Photo “Rhetorica”: Pixabay, http://pixabay.com/en/hildesheim-germany-lower-saxony-711009/ (CC0)