Paul and Ancient Rhetoric
An Introduction to a Continuing Discussion

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Was Paul an ancient rhetorician? This question continues to be asked by a range of New Testament scholars, but with varying and sometimes widely divergent answers. The question appears to be a relatively simple and straightforward one to ask, and perhaps it is. Arriving at an answer appears to be the more difficult task. The reasons for this disagreement are not at first glance altogether clear. This volume offers an attempt to provide a portrait of the current state of discussion regarding this question. In order to do so, we must include representatives of a wide range of approaches to both the question and the possible answers. Before we summarize the various answers that have been offered, allow us to dissect the question more fully, so that we can understand why an answer still eludes New Testament scholars.

The question of whether Paul was an ancient rhetorician entails at least two major facets, each of them worthy of detailed examination. The first is Paul himself. He describes himself as a "Hebrew born of Hebrews" and a Pharisee (Phil 3:5), and the book of Acts also depicts him as a Diaspora Jew of devotion and zeal, even after his encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. The author of the Acts of the Apostles portrays Paul as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25–29) born in Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3), a portrait of a Diaspora Jew confirmed by the Pauline letters in their depiction of the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 1:5; Gal 1:16). As a Jew living in the Hellenized Roman Empire, Paul is something of a microcosm for the blend of cultures from which Christianity emerged. Judaism and its sacred scriptures were foundational for Paul and the early Christian church, yet both were also not only influenced by but an integral part of the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Once he became a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul understood his ministry as being to the Gentiles in the Roman world, and so he needed to communicate with them.

The second major facet entailed by our question is the notion of ancient rhetoric. A major feature of first-century Greco-Roman culture was the

training of orators in the art of rhetoric – defined succinctly from the time of Aristotle on as the means or art of persuasion (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.1). Rhetoric was the basis of advanced education in the ancient Greco-Roman world, and hence became an important tool especially for those who wished to be productive citizens. Various elements of ancient rhetoric were also taught in the lower educational levels. Several handbooks, the most famous including Aristotle's *Rhetorica*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria,* and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, were composed to detail the various theories and techniques of rhetoric. Several *progymnasmata*, or "preliminary exercises," appeared in the first to sixth centuries CE but probably reflect the kinds of exercises that served as training for students of rhetoric in educational settings during much earlier times. Outside these prescriptive rhetorical texts and formal training in rhetoric, there were probably elements of ancient rhetoric that were picked up and used by those in the Greco-Roman world regardless of their level of education or training. The extent to which this is true is often debated, as the subsequent essays sometimes illustrate, but it is clear that rhetoric was highly regarded and used in Hellenistic-Roman culture, even if its skills were not studied or mastered by everyone. The question is how much of ancient rhetoric Paul could have been expected to know, and how we might see such rhetoric displayed in his letters.

Given the importance of rhetoric in the world in which Paul lived and wrote, it is not surprising that many scholars have attempted to read his letters with the help of ancient rhetoric. In fact, the last thirty years has seen a huge resurgence in the use of rhetorical approaches to Paul's letters, to the point that rhetorical commentaries on these letters have become standard fare in many exegetical circles. This is by no means, however, an entirely new development – rhetorical analysis of the Pauline corpus was done by such notable early Christian interpreters as John Chrysostom,[1] Augustine,[2] and Philip Melanchthon,[3] among others. The rhetorical dimensions of Paul's letters were also noted and commented upon by some German scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[4] However,

[1] See J. Fairweather, "The Epistle to the Galatians and Classical Rhetoric: Parts 1 & 2," *TynBul* 45.1 (1994), 2–22.

[2] See book 4 of *On Christian Doctrine*; G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984), 11.

[3] C. J. Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament* (WUNT 128; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 8–16.

[4] See J. Weiss, "Beiträge zur Paulinischen Rhetoric," in C. R. Gregory (ed.), *Theologische Studien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1897), 165–247, although this is not an unqualified statement about Paul's rhetorical abilities.

the use of ancient rhetoric and its categories to analyze Paul's letters in modern New Testament scholarship is often attributed to two more recent scholars: Hans Dieter Betz and George A. Kennedy.[5] These two scholars also represent two different viewpoints on how to apply rhetorical criticism to Paul's letters.[6] The first position, represented by Betz,[7] considers the rhetorical features and arrangement within an overall epistolary framework. The other view, represented by Kennedy,[8] essentially approaches Paul's letters as speeches with epistolary openings and closings (which serve little purpose in the rhetorical argument). While they differ on certain elements, both approaches apply the techniques and categories of the Greek rhetorical handbooks to Paul and his letters. The work of Betz and Kennedy has burgeoned into what amounts to a subdiscipline within New Testament studies. Not only does this work encompass rhetorical commentaries, as noted previously, but it has become an accepted methodological approach to New Testament scholarship, especially in the area of Pauline studies, where publications that utilize types of ancient rhetorical analysis abound.

A survey of much major scholarship since the influential works by Betz and Kennedy, along with a critical look at the use of ancient rhetoric and epistolography to interpret Paul's letters, is found in the first essay of this volume by Carl Joachim Classen. A celebrated classical scholar (sadly, now deceased), Classen contributed several important studies on the topic of Paul and ancient rhetoric, including his influential *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament* (2000), which included a number of important essays. In the essay included in this volume, translated into English for the first time, Classen addresses the most significant issues regarding using rhetorical criticism to interpret Paul's letters and presents the merits and pitfalls of such an approach. Classen is fully aware of the range of scholarship within the Western intellectual tradition and uses Betz and Kennedy as his starting point. He offers a critique of their work, especially of how it has been asked to solve problems for which it is entirely unsuitable. Classen also has strong doubts regarding the use of rhetorical

[5] For a brief history of rhetorical analysis of the New Testament, see H. D. Betz, "The Problem of Rhetoric and Theology according to the Apostle Paul," in A. Vanhoye (ed.), *L'Apôtre Paul: Personalité, style et conception du ministère* (BETL 73; Leuven: Leuven University, 1986), 16–21; F. W. Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians* (JSNTSup 30; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 20–30.

[6] See S. E. Porter, "Paul of Tarsus and His Letters," in S. E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 533–85 (539–41).

[7] His major work is found in his *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

[8] His major work is *New Testament Interpretation*.

criticism, even as evidenced in more recent work than that of Betz and Kennedy, where he argues that rhetorical criticism cannot help us to understand one of Paul's ancient letters. Classen provides a salutary assessment from one who has studied both the classical and the New Testament literary traditions.

Was Paul a Rhetor?

To ask whether Paul was a rhetor is in many ways a potentially misleading question – or perhaps a question that requires further definition before it becomes answerable. On the one hand, Paul certainly was a rhetor, if by that one means that he demonstrates techniques that can be construed as designed to persuade his audience to do or think specific things. So, for example, when Paul engages in a question-and-answer style of writing in his letter to the Romans (τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν – "What then are we to say?" Rom 4:1, 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14; 9:30), it is clear that there is some rhetorical function intended by this usage. That Paul made use of rhetorical techniques – even some of those techniques or categories, especially of style, described in the ancient handbooks and *progymnasmata* – is not in serious doubt. On the other hand, if we mean that to be a rhetor Paul must have had formal rhetorical training of the kind secured through a rhetorical school, then the question is more difficult to answer. The extent to which Paul understood and intentionally made use of the ancient rhetoric of Hellenistic culture is far from clear, to say nothing of the question of whether he was a formal student of rhetoric. Is there any indication that Paul had training in ancient rhetoric and/or structured his letters using the conventions found in the handbooks? Further, is there any justification for applying these conventions and categories when interpreting Paul's letters? These are the kinds of questions discussed, at least in part, by several essays in this volume.

To get at these questions, we must first ask whether there is evidence that Paul had any formal rhetorical training. The New Testament has little to say on this question. Paul's letters say nothing about Paul's education or even much about his specific upbringing. Acts 22:3 provides some insight into Paul's educational background when its author quotes Paul, while arrested in Jerusalem, as saying that he was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, raised in "this city," and trained under the Jewish teacher Gamaliel. The grammar is ambiguous and has spurred debate concerning whether Paul was educated in Tarsus or Jerusalem. A majority of scholars understand the reference to Gamaliel to signify that Paul received his formal education in

Jerusalem.[9] However, it has been argued that this verse does not exclude a Tarsus education for Paul and that he could have been educated in both Tarsus and Jerusalem.[10] If Paul received some education in Tarsus, it is unlikely nevertheless that he attended a rhetorical school there, especially if his advanced education took place in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. On the basis of his letter writing, it is probable that Paul received some formal education, and with that at least some exposure to some elements of rhetoric. Given the influence of Greco-Roman culture, including rhetoric, in Jerusalem, it is possible that Paul received some rhetorical knowledge, even if informal, even if most of his education occurred in that city.[11] The nature and extent of this training are still subject to question, wherever he received it. It may not have exceeded the kind of exposure that any grammar school student would have received. Even if he were educated in rhetoric in some way in Jerusalem, such exposure would probably have been through an interpretation of Jewish thought rather than as rhetoric strictly for civic oratory purposes.[12] However, even this is speculative since there is no clear evidence that Paul had any formal education in ancient rhetoric or training in the Greek rhetorical handbooks.

Some have argued that Paul's vocabulary indicates formal knowledge of rhetoric. These include ἀλληγορεῖν (Gal 4:24); βεβαίωσις and πειθός (Gal 5:8); μετασχηματίζειν (1 Cor 4:6); παράκλησις, παραμυθία, and their cognates (1 Cor 14:5; Phil 1:2; 1 Thess 2:12); μακαρισμός (Rom 4:6, 9; Gal 4:15); δυσφημεῖν (1 Cor 4:13); εὔφημος (Phil 4:8); συντέμνειν (Rom 9:28); ἑρμηνεία (1 Cor 12:10; 14:26); ἀνελεήμων (Rom 1:31); and ἐπιβαρεῖν (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8; 2 Cor 2:5).[13] However, it has also been

[9] See M. Hengel with R. Deines, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (London: SCM, 1991), 18–39. The classic study of this position is W. C. van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem: The City of Paul's Youth* (London: Epworth, 1962).

[10] Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, for example, argues that the author of Acts's obvious attempt to connect Paul to Jerusalem works against the credibility of his statement. Rather, Murphy-O'Connor works from the premise that Paul remained in Tarsus and received a formal education there (*Paul: A Critical Life* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1996], 32–51). For more on this verse and its interpretation, see A. W. Pitts, "Hellenistic Schools in Jerusalem and Paul's Rhetorical Education," in S. E. Porter (ed.), *Paul's World* (PAST 4; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 19–50 (27–33).

[11] However, as Pitts points out, "Though Jerusalem was heavily Hellenized, as many have emphasized, it was still far from attaining the status of a center for Greek culture. Therefore, like other cities of its kind, we would only expect it to have schools that facilitated basic literacy and possibly some access to liberal education. The more advanced types of instruction found in the city would have undoubtedly been rabbinical institutions and Jewish wisdom schools, which no one doubts Paul had access to" (Pitts, "Hellenistic Schools," 33–4).

[12] Porter, "Paul of Tarsus," 535.

[13] For a list and discussion, see Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 29–44.

argued that Paul's use of words commonly associated with ancient rhetoric does not prove any formal education. These instances disclose intelligent use of the Hellenistic Greek of Paul's time, perhaps with informal knowledge of some rhetorical terminology – especially since some of this language was used in other places than just rhetorical circles.[14] Others have attempted to show Paul's rhetorical skill by appealing to the structure of his letters and use of techniques described in the Greek handbooks. A common approach in this type of rhetorical analysis is to show how the structure of a Pauline letter fits the arrangement of rhetorical speeches described in ancient rhetoric. Some have challenged such a notion by pointing out that Paul's letters do not fit as easily into the rhetorical structures described in the ancient handbooks.

The extent of Paul's rhetorical training and knowledge remains an active area of debate within New Testament and classical scholarship. Several essays in this volume take on this issue, providing new and different ways of analyzing the evidence. In his essay, Andrew W. Pitts examines key social, historical, and economic factors concerning Paul's education, including educational traditions in Tarsus and in Diaspora Judaism, as well as discussing the apostle's socioeconomic status. He believes that Paul may well have received grammar school education in Tarsus, but that he then followed a long-established Tarsian tradition of students going elsewhere for their advanced education, in Paul's case to Jerusalem. Christos Kremmydas approaches the question through a robust examination of Paul's writings in light of the wider rhetorical background of the first century. Kremmydas offers a thorough examination of rhetorical education in the Greco-Roman world, before examining two examples of the use of rhetorical exercises in the papyri, to which he compares Paul's writings. He concludes that Paul demonstrates some knowledge of these preliminary rhetorical exercises (*progymnasmata*). Taking a different approach, Frank W. Hughes addresses the question of Paul's training in the opposite way from the two earlier treatments. Hughes begins by exploring the rhetorical features (arrangement, topics, figures) that one finds within Paul's writing, and posits that the cause of these features was that Paul availed himself of the widespread rhetoric that surrounded him in the culture. Stanley E. Porter examines the issue of Paul's rhetorical training by looking at ancient literate culture in the first century. Porter argues that whereas Paul may well have received some preliminary or basic exposure to rhetoric through grammar school training, Paul was not a formally trained orator;

[14] Porter, "Paul of Tarsus," 535–6.

nor could one gain such training apart from the rhetorical schools. Instead, the literate culture of the Greco-Roman world, in which the populace was dependent upon access to written documents, can account for those features of rhetoric that are to be found within the writings of that era such as Paul's.

What Is "Rhetoric"?

The term "rhetoric," derived from the Greek word ῥητορικός, was used as early as the fifth and fourth centuries BCE by Socrates and Plato, although the concept certainly extends much further back in Greek thought. Rhetoric was used to refer to the art of public speaking but was understood as a part of a broader knowledge of the persuasive power of words and their potential to affect a situation.[15] Ancient rhetoricians commonly discussed three genres of rhetoric: *deliberative* (used to motivate an audience for/against a certain future action), *forensic* (used to attack or defend a past action; commonly found in a law court context), and *epideictic* (focused on the present and used to praise or blame).[16] The ancient handbooks, especially those roughly from the time of Paul, also discuss such elements of rhetoric as the arrangement of the material and how one develops support for one's argument. The ancient handbooks and *progymnasmata* also detail a variety of rhetorical devices and figures that orators could and should utilize in whatever context they find themselves.[17] It should be stressed that such rhetoric, especially as described in the ancient handbooks, was intended to train orators to deliver before an audience – although written exercises were certainly included. Thus, there is a stress on memory and delivery, including one's performance, such as one's voice, gestures, and ability to take on a character or impersonation.

Thus, *ancient* rhetoric refers to the articulation of the art of persuasion that we find in the numerous rhetorical handbooks and *progymnasmata* from the centuries before and immediately after the life of Paul. This is not to say that contributors to this volume do not also use models for interpreting Paul's letters beyond ancient rhetoric. However, all of the essays engage with the relationship between Paul and the rhetoric of his time as we have defined it.

[15] G. A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1994), 3.
[16] See Aristotle, *Rhet.* 3.12; Kennedy, *New History*, 4.
[17] See Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, esp. 3–38; G. A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 10; Atlanta: SBL, 2003).

The writings of Paul, however, are just that – writings. Whether one adopts the terminology "epistles" or "letters" to refer to Paul's writings, any exploration of Paul and ancient rhetoric must take into account the fact that the evidence that we have before us is a set of written documents. If ancient rhetoric was predominantly concerned with oral speeches, how are we to make sense of the application of categories from ancient rhetoric to Paul's written discourses? This juxtaposition of two different types of discourse – oral and written – inevitably leads to discussion of epistolography. Ancient epistolary theory was concerned with the craft of letter writing – as found in letter writing manuals from antiquity.[18] Although overlapping in many regards, such as some attempts to define the types of letters and the genres of ancient rhetoric, ancient rhetorical theory and epistolary theory were two different fields in antiquity and only in the fourth century or so was letter writing explicitly incorporated into rhetorical handbooks.[19]

While all of the essays in this volume explore the connection between ancient rhetoric and Paul's letters, several specifically examine important categories within the respective fields of rhetoric and epistolary theory as displayed across the Pauline canon. Glenn S. Holland focuses on delivery and how ancient orators understood the physical features of oral performance. While any performance of Paul's writings is lost to the modern reader, Holland places Paul within first-century oratory culture in order to understand his persuasive power better. Lauri Thurén, returning to a proposal that he introduced a number of years ago to develop it further, recognizes that epistolography and rhetorical criticism are separate fields within the ancient world and so argues that Paul's letters defy both ancient rhetorical and epistolary theories. He instead offers a heuristic approach that examines the functional level of Pauline persuasion.

The Legitimacy of Using Ancient Rhetoric to Interpret Paul's Letters

In many ways, the fundamental issue addressed in this volume is the validity of using ancient rhetoric, as defined previously, for analyzing and interpreting the Pauline letters. Several issues – such as those

[18] See C. Poster, "A Conversation Halved: Epistolary Theory in Greco-Roman Antiquity," in C. Poster and L. C. Mitchell (eds.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2007), 21–51.

[19] A. J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* (SBLSBS 19; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 2; Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism*, esp. 26.

mentioned – call this validity into question and challenge the extent to which one can use ancient rhetorical categories to interpret a Pauline letter. At the same time, there are numerous examples of application of rhetorical criticism to Paul's letters that have generated numerous observations about the Pauline corpus through their approach. The intention of this volume is neither to assume the validity of rhetorical criticism for interpreting Paul's epistles nor to dismiss such an approach out of hand. Rather, it provides an opportunity for a number of scholars – all of whom have made significant contributions to the topic of Paul and ancient rhetoric – to engage this issue regardless of their stance on the question of the legitimacy of rhetorical criticism as an approach to Pauline interpretation. As such, some contributions argue for and others against the application of ancient rhetoric to the Pauline corpus. Some essays concentrate upon engaging the critical issues involved in this conversation; others argue for the validity of rhetorical criticism by applying some aspect of it to a Pauline letter.

The final section contains six essays that look at specific letters of Paul or sometimes simply a unit within a Pauline letter, and its possible relationship to ancient rhetoric. Robert G. Hall examines the concept of clarity in ancient rhetoric in order to understand how Paul deviates from common theory in his intentionally obscure Rom 1:16–17. Hall finds that obscurity was consciously cultivated in some ancient writers, and Paul was one of them. Hall believes that Paul knew and used ancient rhetoric, even though he also believes that it cannot explain the obscurity of Rom 1:16–17. Bryan R. Dyer looks at Romans 7 and a popular application of rhetorical criticism that interprets the chapter as a *prosopopoeia*, or impersonation or personification. Dyer first defines the ancient use of *prosopopoeia*, and then examines three recent uses of the ancient rhetorical category as tools for rhetorical analysis of Paul's characterization of the "I" of Romans 7, ultimately arguing that such an interpretation is unfounded. Turning to Rom 12:1–15:13, Mark D. Given examines the rhetorical function of this unit. Those scholars who see a rhetorical close to Paul's letter to the Romans typically see the peroration beginning at Rom 15:14. Given believes that the entire unit is indeed parenetic, but also serves as the developing peroration of the entire book. In their essay, Thomas H. Olbricht and Stanley N. Helton employ Aristotle's understanding of enthymemes in order to understand better the rhetorical power of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. They begin by defining Aristotle's notion of the enthymeme and then show how it is used within the arrangement of 1 Thessalonians to create a number of enthymematic assumptions. These assumptions form the structure of the body of Paul's

letter. David A. deSilva moves away from a *prescriptive* application of ancient rhetoric toward a more *heuristic* model by examining Paul's appeal to *logos, pathos*, and *ethos* in Gal 5:1–12. This passage has proved difficult to understand in several respects that, so deSilva contends, can be clarified by Paul's appeals to these categories of Aristotelian rhetoric. L. Gregory Bloomquist's essay fittingly concludes this volume by moving beyond the traditional categories of ancient rhetoric. Bloomquist explores how traditional applications of ancient rhetoric might be combined with contemporary methods (cognitive science, sociorhetorical criticism) to improve understanding of Paul's rhetoric. His specific use of socio-rhetorical criticism provides the framework for his reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

The essays in this volume provide a meaningful contribution to the continuing debate over Paul and ancient rhetoric by offering several helpful considerations. The first is to offer a summary of the major issues in the recent history of discussion of the topic of Paul and ancient rhetoric. Throughout these essays, there is appeal to a number of recurring figures in the history of debate and constant issues that re-emerge for consideration. Several of the major figures continue to influence the debate over the major issues regarding Paul and rhetoric, while substantive issues remain for consideration. The second contribution is to the current state of the discussion. This volume does not pretend – and no volume could pretend – to offer a comprehensive summary of the current state of this important topic within New Testament studies of the relationship of Paul to ancient rhetoric. Nevertheless, a number of the essays draw the lines clearly on the issues that continue to be discussed. After thirty years of discussion of ancient rhetoric and Paul's relationship to it, we see that a number of major issues continue to be debated without final resolution. This volume contains a number of essays that make clear what the abiding terms of this debate are and offer serious proposals for consideration that reflect the current state of play. A final consideration is that this volume marks out territory that calls for further exploration. Those who assume that Paul was simply an ancient rhetor and those who categorically dismiss all consideration of ancient rhetoric are not to be found in this volume. Instead, we find scholars attempting to nuance their presentations and weigh seriously not only the merits of the views they oppose but the strengths and weaknesses of their own positions. There has been sufficient discussion of rhetorical theory, especially as it relates to Paul the letter writer, to merit the kind of mature discussion to be found within these essays.