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0521619831 - Romans and the Apologetic Tradition: The Purpose, Genre and Audience of Paul's Letter

Anthony J. Guerra

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**APOLOGETIC AND AUDIENCE: MAKING
THE MESSAGE MEET**

In this chapter, two interrelated interpretive hypotheses concerning Paul's letter to the Romans are presented, namely that the letter is a Προτρεπτικός Λόγος or a Protreptic, and that this Protreptic is directed to an audience comprised in significant part of Jewish Christians. The denial of a significant presence of Jewish Christians in Paul's Roman audience has been argued on both textual and circumstantial grounds and both rationales will be shown to be seriously deficient. Moreover there is a reigning theory among commentators, to the effect that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans as a dress rehearsal for the speech which he intended to give on his upcoming visit to Jerusalem. This proposal has plausibility mainly because the contents of the letter strongly suggest that Paul is addressing Jewish Christians, yet such are excluded from the Roman community by many commentators.¹ Once the reasons for denying that Jewish Christians are part of Paul's audience are found wanting, then the Jerusalem speech hypothesis is readily seen to be untenable. As to the protreptic character of the letter to the Romans, there has generally been surprisingly scant attention paid to the question of the genre of Romans in the history of Romans scholarship. In his revised and expanded *The Romans Debate*, Karl Donfried seems to be correct in asserting that it is too early to celebrate a consensus concerning the rhetorical character of Romans.² Even the emerging consensus that Romans is epideictic – one of three broad classifications of rhetoric (see glossary) – may be

¹ A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1988), pp. 18–19. Wedderburn names Ernst Fuchs, Jack Suggs, Ulrich Wilckens and Jacob Jervell as among the proponents of this theory. See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, WBC, 38 (Dallas, Word Books, 1988) p. lvi who is the latest exegete of Romans to adopt the Jerusalem speech theory. Dunn does not seem to be aware that this theory is incompatible with his assumption that Paul was informed about the Roman situation, as e.g. at 13.1–7. See also below chapter 6.

² Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, p. lxxi.

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complicated by the initial results of genre criticism (see glossary), as literary genres such as the Protreptic employ more than one kind of rhetoric. Momentarily, we shall review the most significant writings on the ancient protreptic genre and the few attempts to relate the genre to Paul's letter to the Romans.

The appropriation of the protreptic genre by second-century Greek-Christian apologists will provide the context in which to understand the pivotal role that Romans played in the literary and theological development of early Christianity. Several commentators on Romans have noted the element of "apology" in Romans but it has not been observed that there is a more fundamental relationship between Romans and Christian apologetic literature arising from their use of a common literary genre: Protreptic. One of the most commonplace misunderstandings of ancient Christian apologies is that they are primarily reactive or defensive writings. The etymology of the term (ἀπολογία = defense) itself abets this misunderstanding. However, much of early Christian apologetic literature has primarily a protreptic thrust. The terms "apology" and "apologetic" are used widely in scholarly literature on early Christianity.³ In addition to sporadic use in commentaries and journal articles, one finds that standard introductions to the New Testament, histories of early Christianity, and manuals of early Christian and Patristic literature regularly employ the terms "apology" and "apologetic." However, these terms, unlike "Wisdom" and most recently "Apocalyptic,"⁴ have not been given precise definition. One must begin by distinguishing between the terms "apology" and "apologetic."⁵ "Apology" is the designation for several ancient literary works such as Justin's two apologies. The word "apology" may also be used to indicate a genre designation

³ See *inter alia*: W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984); Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, rev. Robert M. Grant (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966); Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols., Philadelphia, Fortress, 1982), vols. I & II; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Vol. I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Utrecht-Antwerp, Spectrum Publishers, 1975); Berthold Altaner, *Patrologie* (Freiburg, Herder, 1978).

⁴ Above all the work of John J. Collins is to be admired for its clarity; see his *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, SBLDS, 13 (Missoula, Mt., Scholars Press, 1974); *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14 (Missoula, Mt., Scholars Press, 1979); and *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York, Crossroads, 1984).

⁵ Paul D. Hanson in an early stage of the work of defining apocalypse made a similar distinction between apocalypse and apocalyptic. See Hanson, "Apocalypticism," *IDB Supp.*, 29.

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for literature whose central function is to adduce arguments contradicting charges that are being made. While explicit themes of such apology are to be found in the so-called Christian apologies, with the possible exception of Athenagoras' work, they are not predominant either quantitatively or structurally in these second-century apologetic writings. From the perspective of literary genre, many if not most of them cannot be adequately or even primarily construed as apologies but are imitative of philosophical Protreptic.⁶ "Apologetic," on the other hand, denotes a certain mode of theological argumentation, the features of which will be outlined after discussion of the secondary literature on the protreptic genre.⁷

ROMANS AND THE PROTREPTIC

The protreptikos logos as a classical genre

Paul Hartlich attempted the first explicit investigation of ancient protreptic literature in his 1889 doctoral dissertation entitled *Exhortationum (Προτρεπτικῶν) a Graecis Romanisque Scriptarum Historia et Indole*.⁸ Hartlich observed that Protreptics could serve either of two purposes: (1) to urge others to take up a particular profession ranging from the military to medicine, or (2) to encourage students to progress further in their chosen disciplines.⁹ Hartlich lamented the loss of the most famous examples of protreptic literature, notably Aristotle's *Protrepticus* and Cicero's *Hortensius*. Following the lead of other German classical scholars of the nineteenth century who recognized that Iamblichus' writings preserve substantial portions of Aristotle's lost work, Hartlich remarks sardonically that the former's greatest value derives from his slavish use of the latter. Although Hartlich's work never rises to the

⁶ On philosophical Protreptic see Mark D. Jordan, "Ancient Philosophic Protreptic." The position that ancient Christian apologies are Protreptic in genre has been previously proposed; see M. Pellegrini, *Studi Su L'Antica Apologetica* (Rome, 1947), pp. 12–23, and Koester, *History and Literature*, pp. 338, 340. I have demonstrated that Justin's *First Apology* is a *logos protreptikos* in Anthony J. Guerra, "The Conversion of Marcus Aurelius and Justin Martyr: The Purpose, Genre, and Content of the First Apology," *The Second Century*, 9:3 (1992).

⁷ For a synoptic view of recurrent motifs in second-century Greek Christian apologetic writings, see Appendix.

⁸ Paul Hartlich, *Exhortationum (Προτρεπτικῶν) a Graecis Romanisque Scriptarum Historia et Indole*, Leipzig Studien II (1889).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 221–3.

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demands of genre criticism to provide a definitive description of the purpose, form, and content of a kind of literature, his comments on Aristotle's work as derived from Iamblichus are still valuable and offer sound leads as to the general characterization of the Προτρεπτικός Λόγος. Both Iamblichus and Proclus were interested in Aristotle's *Protrepticus* because of the latter's defense of philosophy against prevalent criticism.¹⁰ In responding to the objection that philosophers are both impractical and contentious, Aristotle describes the philosopher's task as initially concentrating on the practical concerns of living and only afterwards embracing the arts designed to make human life more cultivated and pleasant.¹¹ Thus, Aristotle argues that philosophy is to be approved because it takes into account the entirety of human life, proceeding from material concerns to the highest endeavor, the contemplation of the divine, and furthermore, it is this intrinsic value of philosophy that has enabled it to persist throughout the ages. Most importantly, Hartlich described the overall structure of the *Protrepticus* as "something akin to a dialogue" (*aliquid dialogi simile*),¹² consisting of three parts: (1) the opponents of philosophy speak; (2) Aristotle refutes them; and (3) Aristotle exhorts to the pursuit of philosophy. Hartlich proposes that Cicero also responded to stated objections to philosophy in the *Hortensius*, first by explicitly refuting the stated objections, and second by praising philosophy and urging others to commit to study it.¹³

In his general survey of epideictic literature, Theodore Burgess includes an important discussion of the Προτρεπτικός Λόγος despite the fact he agrees with Menander's judgment that the genre is a union of the symboleptic and epideictic rhetorical styles,¹⁴ as exhortatory genres readily transcend the distinctions of rhetorical taxonomy. Originated by the Sophists,¹⁵ and widely used by promoters of philosophy and of rhetoric, the Προτρεπτικός Λόγος is a genre of literature that attempts to persuade students to pursue a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 260.¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 267.¹² *Ibid.*, p. 270.¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 293. Hartlich refers respectively to these two parts by the Greek rhetorical terms: λόγος ἀπελεγτικός and λόγος ἐνδεικτικός.¹⁴ Theodore Burgess, "Epideictic Literature," *University of Chicago Studies in Classical Philology*, 3 (1902), 112–13. Recall that Aristotle distinguished between the two rhetorical styles on the basis of the attitude of the hearer who is either a κριτής (judge) or a θεωρός (spectator). Burgess excuses himself from a full treatment of the genre on the grounds that Hartlich has already provided one.¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 229–30.

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proposed way-of-life. Burgess also points to the use of the genre to exhort athletes and soldiers as they were about to engage in their respective contests.¹⁶ Because of the common function to recruit students, the philosophical Protreptics employ rhetorical modes indistinguishable from those of the rival schools of rhetoricians. As the Προτρεπτικός Λόγος is an exhortation to some general way of life inclusive of thought and conduct, the genre could serve a number of professions and thus Protreptics were written to encourage others to adopt, practice, or advance in medicine, the military and athletics as well as rhetoric and philosophy. In passing, Burgess makes the intriguing suggestion that the Προτρεπτικός Λόγος represents a continuation of the paranetic and moralizing elements in Homer, Pindar, and especially the gnomic poets.¹⁷ He characterizes the genre in a broad way as a “union of philosophy and rhetoric.”¹⁸ He relies heavily on Hartlich’s work but does disagree with him that the terms παραίνεσις (paranesis) and προτρεπτικός λόγος can be clearly differentiated, for they are often used interchangeably and “in a loose, indefinite way.”¹⁹ Burgess allows a distinctive technical meaning for the two terms, albeit rarely observed. Technically, the προτρεπτικός λόγος is an exhortation to a general course – philosophy, rhetoric, virtue – articulating a comprehensive view setting forth the advantages and replying to the objections with respect to it, whereas παραίνεσις has a more restricted and personal application, presenting a “series of precepts which will serve as a guide of conduct under fixed conditions.”²⁰ Isocrates’ several Protreptics demonstrate how readily the genre can embrace paranesis-exhortation to follow conventional moral precepts appropriate to common life situations (cf. e.g. James); Προτρεπτικός and Παραίνεσις in practice are often used interchangeably despite their distinctions as technical terms.²¹

More recently, Abraham Malherbe has advanced our understanding of the internal logic of protreptic discourse.²² The protreptic goal to win someone over to a particular enterprise or way of

¹⁶ Ibid., 209–10.¹⁷ Ibid., 173.¹⁸ Ibid., 229–30.¹⁹ Ibid., 230.²⁰ Ibid., 230.²¹ So Pseudo-Justin’s *Cohortatio*, a Λόγος Προτρεπτικός which bears the title Λόγος Παραίνετικός Πρὸς Ἕλληνας.²² Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, LEC, 4 (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1986).

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life is achieved by demonstrating its superiority and exposing the flaws of all competing alternatives. Malherbe has pointed to Epictetus' description of the philosopher's burden of "protrepsis" to reveal the inner inconsistencies in his hearers' lives in order to bring them to conversion:

I invite you to come and hear that you are in a bad way, and that you are concerned with anything rather than what you should be concerned with, and that you are ignorant of the good and the evil, and are wretched and miserable. That's a fine invitation! And yet if the philosopher's discourse does not produce this effect, it is lifeless and so is the speaker.²³

Epictetus likens the philosopher to a physician who diagnoses a patient's illness and then removes cancerous growths, that is, the listener's moral failings:²⁴

Wherefore he (Rufus) spoke in such a way that each of us as we sat there fancied someone had gone to Rufus and told him of our faults; so effective was his grasp of what men actually do, so vividly did he set before each man's eyes his wickedness.

The protreptic writer/speaker points out the self-defeating as well as contradictory way of life which his/her audience is pursuing:

Well! But isn't there such a thing as the right style for exhortation (Protrepsis)? . . . Why, what is the style of exhortation? The ability to show to this individual, as well as to the crowd, the warring inconsistencies in which they are floundering about and how they are paying attention to anything rather than what they truly want. For they want the things that conduce to happiness, but they are looking for them in the wrong place.

²³ Malherbe, p. 122. I am following Malherbe's translation here and in the subsequent quotations of Epictetus.

²⁴ In discussing Protreptic, Philo of Larissa makes this explicit comparison between the philosopher and the physician. He comments that as a physician first offers therapy for illness and second refutes the false remedies of charlatans, so in fulfilling his protreptic task, the philosopher should also expose misleading advice and commend the proper treatment. Stobaeus, *Anth.* 2.7.2 as pointed out by Mark Jordan, "Philosophical Protreptic," 316.

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In Protreptic, the rhetoric of blame or censure serves the positive purpose of exhortation: to encourage the hearer to change his/her life and proceed on a new course or to progress in one already engaged. Negative examples are presented and criticized so as to make the positive models more appealing to the hearer. Evidence for Malherbe's characterization of Protreptic is to be found in Plato's *Euthydemus* (278e–282d; 288b–307c).²⁵ Therein, Socrates offers a protreptic speech in which he exhorts his hearers to wisdom in part by exposing to ridicule the pair Euthydemus and Dionysodorus who are convinced they possess perfect knowledge. The aim of the Protreptic is to bring the hearer to the realization of the need for a teacher and his/her teaching. However, Euthydemus (along with his brother), who serves as the negative exemplum, insists on teaching Socrates that not only he but everyone is omniscient and in the course of this attempt Euthydemus exposes his own foolishness. Socrates represents the exemplary philosopher who understands the limits of his own knowledge and is also capable and worthy of leading others to wisdom and virtue. The processes of censure or indictment exposing error and moral weaknesses, and of praise recommending the good and right way, are complementary in advancing the protreptic purpose to persuade the hearer to turn to the latter. In addition to providing positive reasons for choosing the recommended course and negative reasons for turning away from inferior and/or evil paths, Aristotle's *Protrepticus* and other writings of the genre presume a general atmosphere of hostility and consequently respond explicitly to objections leveled against their espoused worldview.

In his 1986 article, Mark D. Jordan helps to explain the nature of ancient philosophical Protreptic and also examines the extant material that comments upon the protreptic genre.²⁶ Jordan bases his analysis on four Protreptics by philosophers and while noting the existence of Protreptics in other fields is explicitly concerned with defining the genre of philosophical Protreptic. One ancient commentator on the structure of the philosophical Protreptic, Stobaeus, after defining the philosophical Protreptic as an “urging towards virtue,” suggests a two part division for Protreptics: one part “shows the great good of philosophy” and another “refutes

²⁵ A. J. Festugière, *Les Protreptiques de Platon: Euthydeme, Phedon, Epinomis* (Paris, J. Vrin, 1973).

²⁶ Mark D. Jordan, “Ancient Philosophic Protreptic and the Problem of Persuasive Genres,” *Rhetorica*, 4 (1986), 309–33.

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(*apelegkei*) the attacks, accusations and other malicious assaults against philosophy.”²⁷ Iamblichus is reported by Proclus to have divided Protreptic into three parts following his analysis of the *First Alcibiades* of Plato: refutation to overcome ignorance, persuasion to take up the way of virtue and “midwifery” to help recover our original nature.²⁸ Proclus expresses a reservation, however, that such analysis may be confusing means with ends and for him such divisions are only functional headings that subserve the philosopher’s given ends.²⁹ Jordan attempts to move beyond the Procline ends analysis and proposes that it is the “rhetorical situation,” the hearer’s moment of existential choice before ways-of-life which defines the Protreptic: “Protreptics are just those works that aim to bring about the fit choice of a lived way of wisdom – however different the form of these works and their notions of wisdom might be.”³⁰ For Jordan, it is this desired effect that the hearer commit her/his whole self to an “on-going pedagogy” that is the primary characteristic of philosophical Protreptic. Jordan’s identification of this focal motivation generative of philosophical Protreptic is perceptive but it is unfortunate that he retreated from the task of determining the characteristic generic structure of the Protreptic.

Προτρεπτικός Λόγος and Romans

The possible relationship between the protreptic genre and Paul’s letter to the Romans was first noticed by Klaus Berger in the course of his comprehensive genre investigations of New Testament writings. Berger suggested in two writings in 1984 that Romans 1–11 is unique in the New Testament as representing the only sustained piece of protreptic discourse to be found therein.³¹ All other protreptic passages of the New Testament, among which he includes Matthew 11.25–30; 7.13–27; John 3.1–21 etc., are relatively brief. In neither work does Berger argue for his judgment about Romans, as his purpose is to present in both cases a comprehensive review of Hellenistic genres and their appropriation by New Testament writers. He considers the Λόγος Προτρεπτικός in his discussion

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.²⁸ *Ibid.*, 317–18.²⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.³⁰ *Ibid.*, 330.³¹ Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg, Quelle & Meyer, 1984) p. 217; “Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament”, in *ANRW*, Part II, vol. 25/2 (Berlin and New York, de Gruyter, 1984), 1140.

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of symboleutic rhetoric although he acknowledges that it could also be assigned to epideictic.³² A primary feature of the Protreptic, according to Berger, is the use of the “Two Ways of Life and Death” schema such as in the Wisdom of Solomon 1–5 and the Didache I–VI. Romans 1–11 presents the way of Christianity as surpassing the otherwise pre-eminent way of Judaism.³³ Berger notes that it is this general characteristic of Protreptic to recommend a way to its audience contrasted with an alternative path shown to be inferior that is the key to its use by later Christian authors such as Melito of Sardis and Clement of Alexandria.³⁴ Unfortunately, he does not elaborate these seminal ideas.

In 1986, Stanley Stowers devoted one paragraph to a description of Romans as a protreptic letter in his *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. As his title indicates, he intends in this monograph to provide a typology of letter writing in antiquity. According to Stowers, ancient letter writing theory classified letters according to the “typical purposes” that letter writers hope to accomplish.³⁵ He defines the purposes of protreptic works as: “to urge the reader to convert to a way of life, join a school, or accept a set of teachings as normative for the reader’s life.”³⁶ Stowers likens Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* to a letter because, in his view, it is actually “addressed to Aristotle’s royal friend rather than, as is often said, merely dedicated to him.”³⁷ As for Romans, Stowers states that it is in both “form and function” a protreptic letter.³⁸ Stowers understands that, while both answering objections to his teachings throughout Romans 3–11 and censuring the attitudes that prevent Jews and Gentiles from accepting these teachings, Paul recommends his gospel to the Romans and presents himself as a master teacher.

David Aune’s recent article is to date the most serious attempt to argue that Romans is a Λόγος Προτρεπτικός.³⁹ Whereas Jordan suggests that the Λόγος Προτρεπτικός can be either an exoteric

³² Berger, *ANWR*, 1139.

³³ Berger, *Formgeschichte*, 218; *ANWR*, 1140.

³⁴ Berger, *ANWR*, 1139–41.

³⁵ Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, p. 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³⁹ David Aune, “Romans as a Logos Protreptikos in the Context of Ancient Religious and Philosophical Propaganda” in Martin Hengel and Ulrich Heckel (eds.), *Paulus und das antike Judentum* (Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 1992), pp. 91–121. Also published in Karl P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 278–96.

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literary genre directed at the conversion of the outsider or an esoteric genre seeking to strengthen or deepen an insider's commitment to the way already adopted, Aune describes the genre as exclusively exoteric aimed at conversion of the outsider.⁴⁰ Aune notes that the Λόγος Προτρεπτικός includes also a strong element of dissuasion (ἀποτρέπειν) or censure (ἐλεγχειν) that seeks to liberate individuals from erroneous beliefs that would presumably impede conversion.⁴¹ Agreeing with classical sources cited by Jordan that ancient Protreptic reveals a tri-partite structure,⁴² he delineates three basic structural elements of the genre: (1) a negative section centering on the critique of rival sources of knowledge, ways of living, or schools of thought which reject philosophy; (2) a positive section in which the truth claims and ways of living of the philosophical school are presented, praised and defended; followed by (3) an optional section, προτρεπτικός, consisting of a personal appeal to the hearer, inviting the immediate acceptance of the exhortation.⁴³

With respect to Romans, Aune proposes that the main section (Rom. 1.16–15.13) is a Λόγος Προτρεπτικός in an epistolary frame (1.1–15; 15.24–16.27).⁴⁴ Paul, Aune states, is seeking to convince Roman Christians that his gospel is the truth and to explain the lifestyle and commitment that it enjoins. He believes that Paul is contending for his brand of Christianity over other “competing schools of Christian thought,”⁴⁵ but unfortunately does not specify them. Aune attempts to straddle both sides of the debate as to whether Paul writes to address an actual situation in Rome or whether he intends a statement of timeless truths.⁴⁶ He does, however, seem to concur with Robert Karris in rejecting “any supposedly concrete situation to be teased out of the concluding

⁴⁰ Aune, p. 95; Jordan's formulation may better account for the range of ancient protreptic writings and may, incidentally, be more congenial to its instance in Romans.

⁴¹ Aune, p. 96.

⁴² Despite these observations, Jordan himself resists conclusive judgments on the structure of Protreptic, preferring an exclusive existentialist approach to defining the genre. See above.

⁴³ See David E. Aune, p. 101. Aune notes further that the rhetorical strategy of σύγκρισις is frequently employed.

⁴⁴ This distinction between the epistolary frame and the main protreptic section is somewhat undercut by Aune's own admission that “since ancient authors often framed discourses with formal epistolary features, there is no great distance between the Λόγος Προτρεπτικός and the ἐπιστολή Προτρεπτική.” Aune, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Aune, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 112.