

A Book Review of the Ancient Rhetoric and the Style of Paul's Letters by Timothy A. Brookins



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OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book is a reference material dedicated to rhetorical style in the Greco-Roman sense and how Paul engaged it in his epistles. Although the monograph was not formatted into chapters as is the norm in many academic compositions, the arrangements and succession of the topics flow well to prove the argument of the author to posit for Paul's style of writing from a rhetorical perspective. Brookins identifies incorrectness in the style of Pauline's writings through barbarism, solecism, and ornament.¹ It is a deliberate deployment by Paul to persuade his implied readers.

The introduction discusses the style of persuading the audience in the Greco-Roman world and its efficacy by speakers and authors to achieve their objective. Timothy A. Brookins examines the invention of rhetoric in the ancient Greco-Roman world before it became theorized. He states that "By the fifth century BCE, rhetoric had become a matter of "analytic" interest. Originating in the schools of the Greek sophists, the analytic approach to rhetoric gave rise to the first theoretical handbooks, of which the earliest extant examples are Pseudo-Aristotle's *Rhetoric to Alexander* and Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, both dating to the fourth century BCE."² It is an attempt to demonstrate that rhetoric evolved with ancient Greek intellectuals before it became theorized and a field of critical studies. Its theorization is not a recent adventure but dates back to the fourth and fifth centuries when handbooks were designed for teaching rhetoric in Greek Schools. Before this period in the first century BCE, the five main components of rhetoric: invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*), and delivery (*pronuntiatio*) were not fully developed concepts until the fourth and fifth centuries when handbooks on rhetoric began to emerge.³ Rhetoric has since then affected many compositions including the epistles of Paul. It has critically influenced many modern interpreters of Pauline epistles to understand the texts from a rhetorical perspective. This period gave birth to classical rhetoric that does not emphasise only style but persuasion.⁴

Brookins underscores that rhetorical "Correctness" is dependent on two activities: Barbarism which is the unintentional modifications of individual terms, and Solecism which constitutes grammatical and structural mistakes committed through the faulty amalgamation of terms/words. When these occur intentionally, it is considered a style and virtue of persuasion.⁵ Brookins identifies barbarism in Paul's

¹ Timothy A. Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Style of Paul's Letters* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), 29.

² Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 2.

³ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 2-4.

⁴ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 5-8.

⁵ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 28.

letters. For example, the use of *ἐκάστῳ* which functions as a nominative instead of a dative in many Pauline works of literature. He also identifies the phrase *ἐκτὸς εἰ μὴ* in 1 Corinthians 14:5; 15:2; 1 Timothy 5:19 as a solecism with pleonasm.⁶ Similar additions and subtractions in other epistles of Paul in the form of anacoluthon, ellipsis, juxtaposing, and dislocations have been used to persuade implied readers.⁷

According to Brookins “Clarity, or *perspicuitas*, refers to the quality of using language that is immediately apprehensible to the audience.”⁸ This is achieved through the correct arrangement of key terms in a phrase or sentence, lack of it blurs the understanding needed by the implied reader. Paul sometimes deliberately uses *ἢ* “do you not know” to imply that “you know” or not seeking a response to the question posed (1 Cor. 6:2; 8:1; 1 Thess. 2:19). Although these may be wrong links to clauses, it facilitates an interpretative mood that is clear to the implied readers of the first century.⁹

The final tool in Pauline literature is “ornament” which indicates the value of style or embellishment of speech or written document which serves the rhetorical purpose of savouring the audience to respond actively to the author. Ornament can be derived from a single or a group of words/terms. Often, it is realised in how Paul engages the Hebrew Bible in his epistles. For example, Paul's use of the lexical form of *ἀρσενκοίτης* from the LXX in 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10, and *ἄρσην* (male) and *κοιμᾶς* (to lie down) which is derived from Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 in his epistles.¹⁰

Brookins concludes that the loosed style of Paul's presentation though aimed at persuading implied readers has contributed to varied translation nuances in various versions of the Bible in the English language. It is not safe to argue that Paul applies the rules of rhetoric from either the theorized/classical version or its primitive stage. There is a mixture of the two engaged at the convenience of Paul to persuade implied readers. Rightness or wrongness does not matter if the goal of the communication is achieved. Whether primitive or classical rhetoric is engaged the result is critical.

Rhetorical criticism of scripture has received renewed attention from many biblical scholars from the 1970s with the seminal works of Vernon K. Robbins,¹¹ and David deSilva¹² to state but a few. Brookins's study is a critical contribution to the rhetorical study of the New Testament, particularly, Pauline epistles. The examination of Pauline narratives (in Greek) in large blocks particularly from pages 132 to 198 to deduce its rhetorical style of persuasion makes the book indispensable to Pauline scholars who engage in rhetoric to interpret Paul's epistles. It serves as a rhetorical source of criticism to determine the rationale behind the intentional barbarism and solecism in Paul's epistles. It gives clues to how authors of the first century CE could deliberately avoid conventional modes of word order in a structured sentence and phrase to embark on personal aspirations to persuade others.

CONCLUSION

The strength of the work of Brookins points to the nature of religious composition which is a theological writing with some key features to attract others to the faith. In another vein, it raises questions about the level of knowledge that Paul is exposed to Greek rhetoric. The weakness of the reference book is the fact that it combines both disputed and undisputed epistles of Paul as if the dichotomy no longer exists. It is plausible that the rhetorical style may have varied between the disputed and undisputed books of Paul. Probably, Brookins wants to argue that rhetorical style is a unifying factor between the two literatures. Not formatting the reference book into chapters but brief and short headings makes it difficult for ease of

⁶ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 29.

⁷ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 30-44.

⁸ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 44.

⁹ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 45-47.

¹⁰ Brookins, *Ancient Rhetoric*, 47-48.

¹¹ Vernon K. Robbins, *Beginnings and Developments in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Emory University, 2004); Vernon K. Robbins, “Sociorhetorical Criticism: Mary, Elizabeth, and the Magnificat as a Case Study,” in *Foundations for Socio-Rhetorical Exploration: A Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Reader*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins, Robert H. Von Thaden Jr., and Bart B. Bruehler (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016), 119–48; Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Textures of Text: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996).

¹² David A DeSilva, “Hebrews 6: 4-8: A Socio-Rhetorical Investigation (Part 1),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 50, no. 1 (1999): 33–57; David A DeSilva, “The Noble Contest: Honor, Shame, and the Rhetorical Strategy of 4 Maccabees,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 7, no. 13 (1995): 31–57; David A DeSilva, “The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Honor, Shame, and the Maintenance of the Values of a Minority Culture,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (1996): 433–55; David A DeSilva, “The Invention and Argumentative Function of Priestly Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16, no. 2 (2006): 295–323.

intellectual assimilation and reference. That notwithstanding, I recommend this reference book to Pauline scholars, master and Doctor of Philosophy students/candidates majoring in Pauline literature. It is also a significant resource for scholars and students of rhetoric and biblical hermeneutics.

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