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***The Impact of Rhetorical Features
on the Overall Themes of Pauline Letters
and Their Theological Issues***

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Ladies and Gentlemen!

Introduction

More than a decade ago Wilhelm Wuellner – in the midst of a rhetorical revival – entitled one of his articles with the question ”Where is rhetorical criticism taking us?” At this point he most likely didn’t know that this question would even enter the new millenium. Then, in fact, while the number of rhetorical oriented works is constantly growing we still don’t know exactly where rhetorical criticism is taking us. It constantly evokes new questions not only in the area of New Testament but also in other fields of theology.

Now, this section of the annual conference is dedicated to Rhetoric in the New Testament and my particular focus is on the meaning of rhetorical features for the interpretation of Pauline letters. Or more precise: I’m especially interested in rhetorical features of the textual macro-level and their impact on our understanding of setting, contents and intention of Paul’s writings.

Let me explain in more detail. Rhetorical terms like *exordium*, *propositio*, *dispositio*, *genus iudiciale* or *genus deliberativum* entered the common vocabulary of exegesis. In becoming ordinary terms they are in danger of loosing their particular meaning. – For example, in the analytical practice there is almost no difference between the expression ”topical statement” and *propositio*. But why do we use the rhetorical term at all when it doesn’t make a distinctive contribution? – Or the outline of a text! Textlinguistics and epistolography provide us with effective tools to reconstruct the structure of a text. They are already sufficient! What then is the particular plus when the exegete calls the structure *dispositio*? – Or the *genus*! How does the fact that a Pauline letter is written in accordance with the *genus iudiciale* increase our understanding?

In short: Are rhetorical terms only impressive labels for textual elements which also can be discerned without rhetoric? Or does rhetoric make a distinctive contribution? That’s the question! And my answer is of course: It does!

2Cor as a test case

Let me demonstrate this from Second Corinthians. Of course there is much debate about the integrity of this letter and H.D.BETZ, the 1997 president of the Society of Biblical Literature, is an outstanding advocate of partition theories. Anyway I allow myself to regard this writing as a single letter according to an increasing number of scholars and based on my forthcoming dissertation. Even if you would not agree on this point the considerations of this paper are not essentially linked with the integrity of 2Cor. This letter serves only as an example.

The structure, or the *dispositio* of this letter can be reconstructed in the following way: pre-script in 1:1f., *exordium* in 1:3-7, *narratio* in 1:8-2:17 with an enclosed *propositio* in 2:14-17, three blocks of argumentation (3:1-6:10; 6:11-9:15; 10:1-12:18), a *peroratio* in 12:19-13:10, and the subscript in 13:11-13.

Genus and setting

Despite this cute outline, Second Corinthians is often perceived as a very disparate letter in which Paul not only rambles from one thought to another but also makes conflicting pronouncements. Sometimes he seems to be pleased with the Corinthians another time he criticizes them harshly. But this foreground ambiguity, is not only restricted to chapter 7 on the one and the chapters 10-12 on the other hand. It is also echoed in the disagreement of the exegetes on how to interpret the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians even in the single parts of the letter. For example RALPH P. MARTIN finds in the *exordium*, especially in 1:6f. an expression of the apostles "confidence ..., that all is well with his readers". DAVID E. AUNE on the other hand interprets the very fact that Paul replaces the usual thanksgiving with a benediction as an expression of an deeply estranged relationship. There is nothing left to thank God for the Corinthians! Who is right?

contribution of the genera

Exactly at this point rhetorical criticism is able to make a distinctive contribution. The decision whether this letter should be understood as a deliberative or a judicial writing is also a decision on how to interpret the relationship between Paul and the addressees. – The deliberative understanding would favor a more intact relationship, at least intact at some basic points. Although there are some difficulties and suspicions, Paul would still have the authority and possibility to give the Corinthians advice. And they would still listen to him. – But writing in the form of the *genus iudiciale* means necessarily deeply alienated relations. Writing in a judicial way shows that the gap between the involved parties is so large that an amicable settlement became impossible. Discussions do not make sense any more. Only an independent judge is able to solve or settle the current problem. – In short: identifying the genus helps to understand the setting!

deliberative elements

Now, there are some obvious deliberative sections. In the chapters 8 and 9 for example Paul tries to involve the Corinthians in the collection for Jerusalem. And at the end of chapter 12 the apostle lists some behavior among the Corinthians which is inadequate for Christians and from which the addressees should get away. Furthermore, Paul several times deals with future actions – the main concern of deliberative rhetoric: The Corinthians ought to complete the collection and Paul will be stern at the next visit.

judicial elements

On the other hand there are many judicial elements scattered throughout the whole letter. According to Aristotle a *narratio* is absolutely necessary in the forensic speech only – and the first two chapters of 2Cor contain many narrative elements! Actually, there is also a certain focus on the past, even in the last three chapters, where Paul several times writes about his conduct while he stayed at Corinth.

Additionally, the oath formula needs to be mentioned, which was a common practice in ancient forensic speeches especially on the side of the accused person. Paul employs several of

them. He appeals to the trustworthiness of God with the phrase "As surely as God is faithful our word to you has not been 'Yes and No'" (1:18), and adds the words "I call on God as witness against me" (1:23). Similar are the expressions "in the presence of Christ" (2,10), "I appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (10,1), "the truth of Christ is in me" (11,10) or the sentence "We are speaking in Christ before God" (2,17; 12,19).

Finally, there is some specific forensic terminology. Looking back from the end of the letter Paul talks in 12,19 about defending himself before the Corinthians. He uses judgement terms like "sentence of death" (*apokrima tou thanatou* – in 1,9) and "condemnation" (*katakrisis* – in 3,9; 7,3), he refers to the *bema*, the judgment seat of Christ and uses often the terminology of testing (*dokime*) a person or the truth of its pronouncements.

Meaning for 2Cor

For these and other reasons its adequate to ascribe 2Cor to the *genus iudiciale*. Of course, we might ask now whether this fact reflects some kind of judicial conventions in Early Christianity. Did a legal codex exist which allowed the opponents in Corinth or the Corinthians themselves to accuse Paul? Was there something like a community judgment? Or do these charges reflect an illegal procedure which Paul counters with a judicial-like writing?

Anyway, Paul's decision to write in the form of the *genus iudiciale* made him produce a very uncommon piece of rhetoric, because – as you all know – it's almost impossible to discover another ancient letters which can be ascribed to this *genus*. In writing that way Paul displays his evaluation of the situation. He perceives the relationship as deeply alienated. He can't give advice anymore. His authority is undermined. The less severe version of rhetoric, the deliberative *genus* had become impossible. Therefore the appeal to an independent judge.

As a consequence this literary form even leads to a different understanding of the friendly sounding passages. For example the phrase "I do not say this as a command" in chapter 8 is not an expression of friendliness but an evidence for the estranged relationship. Also the remarks in ch. 7. In v.11 Paul starts with impressive and praising words about the Corinthians: "For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, such a concern to defend yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such longing, such zeal, such reprisal! On every point you showed yourselves to be innocent ..." These words nurture great expectations. But at the end of the sentence Paul tears everything down in saying "On every point you showed yourselves to be innocent – in that matter." His praise is restricted to a particular matter only and is not a pronouncement about a fundamental change in the attitudes of his readers!

Although I have to hurry already a little, two more rhetorical features deserve to be mentioned in regard to the topic of this paper: the so-called *conditio translativa* and the *propositio*.

The conditio translativa

There is another connotation in the above made statement that Paul writes in the *genus iudiciale*. Paul's decision to employ this style does not mean that he would accept the Corinthian community as the proper tribunal.

Looking back to the letter at the beginning of the *peroratio* in 12:19 the apostle is talking about defending himself. At first sight it seems as if Paul would submit to the trial opened against him in Corinth. But his words about defense have the form of a question "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you?" (12:19). He is questioning the entire forensic construction. The Corinthians are in no way the adequate forum for the matter of issue.

In the immediately following words Paul points to the only court to which he feels responsible: "We are speaking in Christ before God" and the word "only" could be added. This phrase "We are speaking in Christ before God" is a formula which occurs only in 2Cor and here at two very important points: at the beginning of the *peroratio*, looking back to the entire discourse, and at the climax of the *propositio*, prefiguring the following *argumentatio*. Paul moves the entire conflict into the sight of God.

And he does this in various ways. Several times he speaks of the sight of Christ or God. He has forgiven in the sight of Christ (2:10), his missionary activities take place in the sight of God (4:2), he is concerned about the collection in the sight of God (8:21) and he challenges the Corinthians to demonstrate their response to him in the sight of God (7:12). Moreover he several times refers to the final judgment or the Last Day (1:14; 4:14; 5:10; 11:15).

It's obvious that Paul is responding to charges against his person but he moves the entire scenery. This is a rhetorical strategy called *conditio translativa*. According to CICERO this strategy is necessary when a "person does not bring the right suit, or that he brings it against the wrong person, or before the wrong tribunal, or at the wrong time, under the wrong statute, or the wrong charge, or with a wrong penalty" (Cic., inv. 1,8,10). Then it's "necessary to transfer the action to another court, or to make a change in procedure" (Cic., inv. 2,19,57).

Meaning for 2Cor

Again it's the meaning of this strategy which is of interest. On the hand it's a clever move in order to demonstrate to the Corinthians that the charges against Paul are inadequate or even illegal. Paul expresses his rejection of an immanent judgment which is restricted to the human sphere only. In the current issue a judicial hearing resp. a trial is possible in the sight of God only.

On the other hand this strategy is even more than a clever move. The fact that Paul transfers the scenery in the sight of God, that he appeals to the highest possible court he gives the whole situation a tremendous severity. Arguing with God's judgement has always a threatening tone. And in the present case it indicates that Paul perceives the matter at issue not as a negligible matter of different perspectives or opinions but of right and wrong, of true and false, of legal and illegal. God has to speak a sentence! And a godly sentence could also mean punishment or even more!

Does Paul even allude to a soteriological danger?

The propositio

In order to find an answer to this question we turn to one of the major parts of the rhetorical disposition: the *propositio*. This part of the speech gives the relevant details of the following discourse. It displays agreements and disagreements between the orators and

presents the major thesis. The *propositio* prefigures the whole argumentation. And therefore everything written in a text needs to be understood in the light of these statements.

Usually the *propositio* of 2Cor is located at the end of chapter 2. Some scholars see it in V.17 only: "For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but we are speaking in Christ before God". Other exegetes regard the verses 2,14-17 together as the *propositio*. This would include the preceding words to the topical statement: "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in a triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death; to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?"

Most obviously, it's not a minor question whether Paul wants to prove in the *argumentatio* that he is not a peddler of God's word and speaks in Christ before God or whether he wants to present this fact as a divisive event with eternal consequences. In the later case the division according to the response to the apostle would have – according to the function of the *propositio* - a connection to the situation of this letter, and this means to the reaction of the Corinthians!

A decision can be made according to the ancient handbooks. They require the *propositio* to have an anaphoric and a kataphoric dimension. On the one hand it summarizes and concludes the *narratio* and on the other hand it displays the major issues of the following *argumentatio*. Only the verses 14-17 can fulfill this function. For example the different reactions to the apostle, expressed in 2:14f., refer back to those who brought the affliction in Asia, to the "many" in 1:11 which give thanks for Paul, for the first preaching in Corinth (1:17f.), to the one who insulted Paul (2:5f.), to the positive reaction in Troas (2:12f.). And these reactions point also ahead to those whose minds are blinded by the God of this world (4:1ff.), to those who misunderstand the apostle (6:3-10), to the oppositions in 6:14ff. and to the opponents in the last chapters.

In the case, that the verses 14 and 15 are a necessary part of the *propositio* their content must necessarily refer to the situation of the discourse – and this means to the momentary negative reaction of the Corinthians! Their refusal to reciprocate to the apostle is not a special case which deserve to be regarded as extenuating circumstances but is submitted to the general case of rejecting the apostle. – This resembles a common practice in ancient rhetoric to include the most fitting paragraph from the law in the *propositio*. The whole issue needs to be considered according to the cited paragraph. Of course, Paul doesn't cite from a judicial codex but he articulates a basic or fundamental fact which – in his thinking – has a similar function as the law in society.

That the Corinthians are meant with these threatening words although they are not mentioned explicitly can be underscored by an additional observation. In the travelogue of 2:12f. Paul talks about surprising events in Troas and that he couldn't find rest in his mind because he couldn't find Titus from whom he expected news from Corinth. At this point the travelogue breaks off. It's the moment in which Paul didn't know whether the Corinthians would respond positively or negatively. And exactly this uncertainty is followed by his remarks on the divisive nature of his ministry and the separation according to the reaction on him! – The reaction of the Corinthians will be judged according to the statement of 2:14f.: "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those

who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death; to the other a fragrance from life to life.” It’s up to the addressees reaction to Paul whether they will live or perish!

Summary

Let me summarize the results of the presented considerations.

Without having clarified the exact issue which is under dispute between Paul, the Corinthians and Paul’s opponents, the rhetorical features employed in the letter display a dark scenery.

Already Paul’s decision to write in the style of the *genus iudiciale* makes it clear that he perceives the relationship between him and the addressees as deeply estranged. – By using the *conditio translativa* and moving the scenery in the sight of God he gives the estrangement of the Corinthians a severe and threatening note. – And in the *propositio* he points at a judicial-like, fundamental principle under which the Corinthians will be judged: to reciprocate to Paul means live and to refuse the mutuality to him means perishing.

Hopefully it became obvious that rhetorical terms are not only handy labels for textual features which could be detected also by other methods and labeled according to other terminological conventions but have to make a contribution of their own. To consider rhetorical features thoroughly and to interpret them in a radical way will contribute to our understanding of the Pauline letters. And to take rhetorical elements seriously could also help to surmount the still existing suspicions against rhetorical criticism.

Thank you for your attention!