Introduction: Interpreting the Expressible in Early Christian Discourse

Introduction

The New Testament is remarkably graphic and argumentative at the same time. Verse after verse creates a vivid picture in the mind of the hearer. The pictures create frames of understanding that are highly persuasive to the hearer or reader. In the context of the verbal pictures, the verses regularly contain assertions supported by reasons and rationales beginning with “for,” “since,” or “because.” In addition, the verses present conclusions that begin with words commonly translated as “therefore” or “thus.” There have been various attempts to develop a mode of interpretation that investigates and explains the function of this combination of the picturesque and the persuasive in biblical interpretation. Some, for example, consider the term “parable” especially helpful for describing the function of New Testament literature. Others, in turn, consider “metaphor” to be a special mode of thinking that guides New Testament literature and the modes of belief that emerge after it. Still others consider the most appropriate terminology for the combination of picture and argumentation in the New Testament to be “myth.”

A Major Problem with Current Rhetorical Interpretation of the New Testament

Rhetorical interpretation holds the promise of analyzing and interpreting the dynamic interrelation of the picturing and argumentation in the New Testament and other early Christian literature. But there is a major problem. Rhetorical interpretation, as it was re-introduced to New Testament interpretation during the last half of the twentieth century used an incorrect picturing of the situations underlying the argumentation in the New Testament. Hans Dieter Betz, Wilhelm Wuellner, and George A. Kennedy, who led the way, all used the classical categories of judicial (forensic), deliberative (symbouletic), and epideictic (demonstrative) rhetoric as the gateway into rhetorical interpretation of
The Invention of Christian Discourse

The problem is that the picturing of the conventional situations underlying classical rhetoric is incorrect for the conventional situations underlying the rhetoric in the New Testament.

Classical rhetoric pictures the major rhetorical situations in the life of people on the basis of the city-state understood as a city. From the perspective of classical rhetoric, there are three primary settings that guide the training of an orator and that serve the public at large by their skillful contribution to society. The first kind of classical rhetoric envisions the law court, where a judge and a jury make decisions about the guilt or innocence of someone whom a prosecutor says has committed a crime and whom a defendant says is innocent of the charge. The picturing of a law court underlies judicial (or forensic) rhetoric in classical rhetorical interpretation. The goal is to persuade the audience (the judge and jury) to reach a decision of guilty or acquitted. Regularly, this kind of rhetoric is focused on action in the past that someone claims caused improper damage or death and someone else claims was necessary or accidental. The second kind of classical rhetoric envisions the political assembly, where a leader in the city speaks to the gathered population of the city to convince them to take an action like going to war or building a wall around the city. The picturing of a political assembly underlies deliberative (or sounbouletic) rhetoric in classical rhetorical interpretation. The goal is to persuade the audience either to take a particular action (like going to war) or not to take a particular action (for example, not going to war). This kind of rhetoric is focused on the future, where people are in a position to make a decision to engage in a particular kind of action, not to engage in that particular action, or to engage in some other kind of action. The third kind of classical rhetoric envisions the civil ceremony, where a speaker delivers a funeral oration or a speech to dedicate the launching of a new ship, the completion of a new harbor, or some other public accomplishment or experience of disaster. The picturing of a civil ceremony underlies epideictic (or demonstrative) rhetoric in classical rhetorical interpretation. The goal is to use praise and blame to address a series of topics in a manner that will confirm and strengthen people's commitment to conventional values of that which is right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. Hans Dieter Betz, Wilhelm Wuehlner, George A. Kennedy, and their contemporaries and successors in Klaus Berger, Robert Jewett, Duane F. Watson, Frank Witt Hughes, Elisabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza, Margaret M. Mitchell, and others have all begun with picturing the alternative underlying situations in New Testament literature from classical rhetoric, which is based on conventional social situations in the city-state and subsequently the city in Hellenistic and Roman times.

The problem is that argumentation in the New Testament does not presuppose that the law court, political assembly, and civil ceremony work positively for Christian belief and practice. These conventional social institutions in cities throughout the Roman empire regularly created problems, suffering, conflicts, persecution, imprisonment, and even death for early Christians. To counter these institutions, early Christians developed argumentation that used picturing based on social interaction related to households, political kingdoms, imperial armies, imperial households, temples, and individual bodies of people. This picturing of multiple social situations created Christian rhetorical discourse in the form of wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, priestly, and miracle argumentation during the first century CE. During the second century, Christians began to envision Christianity as a city, and in this context they began to develop discourse of Christian legal decision (judicial rhetoric based on Christian law courts), Christian political action (deliberative rhetoric based on Christian assemblies), and Christian public display of honor and shame (epideictic rhetoric based on Christian public ceremonies). During the third and fourth centuries CE, many Christians were directly appropriating the categories of city-based classical rhetoric. Thus, it is appropriate to use the categories of classical rhetoric for Christian discourse during the third and fourth centuries CE and onwards. It is, however, necessary to blend these categories with the inner workings of wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, priestly, and miracle rhetoric as they developed during the first century CE and continued throughout the centuries until today.

Sociorhetorical Interpretation as an Interpretive Analytic

This book uses rhetorical analysis and interpretation based on both oral and literary dynamics within social, cultural, ideological, and religious contexts of interaction during the first century CE to interpret New Testament literature. The overall scope of the book includes insights that span a period of time from 1000 BCE through the emergence of Islam and the Qur’an during the seventh century CE. The primary focus, however, is on the seventy year period from the death of Jesus (ca. 30 CE) to the end of the first century (100 CE). The traditional name for this mode of interpretation is sociorhetorical interpretation (regularly abbreviated SRI by its proponents). This mode of interpretation began

during the last half of the 1970s and was first named in 1984 in my
*Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of the Gospel of Mark*.

In many ways, the present book is my way of working with issues
that Anthony C. Thiselton introduced to New Testament interpreters in
1980 in the chapters in *The Two Horizons* where he interwove a dis-
cussion of the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein with the writings of Hei-
degger, Bultmann, and Gadamer. I worked through those chapters in
detail in 1985, but my location in a department and graduate division
of religion, rather than a department of religion and philosophy, led me
to address the heavily philosophical issues through the writings of other
colleagues in the field rather than through direct engagement with
Thiselton’s writings. The present volume is an additional step in ad-
dressing the linguistic turn, the pictorial turn, and the embodiment
of language that Thiselton continually addresses in the name of herme-
neutics in his work.

The immediate goal of the present book is to provide tools, insights, and
strategies for commentators to interpret the New Testament as a creative
mode of discourse within first century Mediterranean society. In this re-
gard, it is important to know that a key dynamic of sociorhetorical criti-
cism, in contrast to literary-historical-theological methods of the 19th and
20th centuries, is its nature as an interpretive analytic. Sociorhetorical
criticism, properly understood and applied, is not a method. A method uses
a limited number of analytical strategies for the purpose of reaching a con-
clusion that is superior to the use of the analytical strategies of another
method. The goal of a method is to exclude the analytical strategies of
another method by using superior strategies for reaching a particular de-
sired and limited goal. An interpretive analytic, in contrast to a method,

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applies analytical strategies for the purpose of inviting other analytical strategies where those other strategies could illuminate something the first set of strategies did not find, exhibit, discuss, and interpret.

In political terms, literary-historical-theological methods apply either a politics of exclusion, with a presupposition that the excluded is inferior, or a politics of inclusion that reduces the identity of those included to an identity that contributes to the point of view of the person applying the strategies of analysis and interpretation. In contrast, a sociorhetorical interpretive analytic applies a politics of invitation, with a presupposition that the people invited into the conversation will contribute significantly new insights as a result of their particular experiences, identities, and concerns. In other words, a sociorhetorical interpretive analytic presupposes genuine teamwork: people from different locations and identities working together with different cognitive frames for the purpose of getting as much insight as possible on the relation of things to one another.

In the final analysis, then, the difference between a method and an interpretive analytic is philosophical. The philosophy of a method is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is “in something itself.” In contrast, the philosophy of an interpretive analytic is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is exhibited in the way it relates to all other things. This is a difference between a philosophy of essence or substance and a philosophy of relations. The presupposition underlying the approach in this volume is that while the 19th and 20th centuries benefited immensely from philosophies that guided people toward the particularities of different things, a primary task for the 21st century is to guide people toward a robust understanding of the relation of things to one another. The goal is not, “You are included on my terms,” but “You are included on your own terms.” This is a difficult philosophy to apply and to fulfill as a result of multiple self-oriented philosophies based on philosophies of essence and substance, but it is a goal, we submit, that we must try to emulate in our research, analysis, and interpretations during the 21st century.

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6 Robbins, “Where is Wuellner’s Anti-Hermeneutical Hermeneutic Taking Us?”, 105-25.
A long-range goal of the present book is to provide insights into the ways Christian thinking, reasoning, and believing work internally and in relation to other kinds of thinking, reasoning, and believing. The immediate data, therefore, is the New Testament literature in its Mediterranean context during the first century. Regularly, however, the discussion concerns the entire Bible, Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman literature outside the Bible at the time of the emergence of Christianity, and Christian tradition down through the seventh century, when some people and topics of New Testament tradition were presented dynamically in the official version of the Qur’an overseen by Muhammad’s secretary Zayd b. Thâbit and authorized by the caliph ‘Uthmân. All of this data will help us to understand the nature of Christian discourse both in the context of its emergence during the first century of the Christian era and in the context of its relation to other discourse.

A basic presupposition of the approach is that although first century Christians lived in a culture we regularly describe as “traditional,” they found ways to weave new dimensions into existing modes of Mediterranean discourse. The study concludes that early Christians reconfigured multiple forms of preceding and contemporary discourse by blending pictorial narrative with argumentative assertions in ways that created distinctive social, cultural, ideological, and religious modes of understanding and belief in the Mediterranean world. This book moves beyond The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse and Exploring the Texture of Texts, therefore, by focusing on sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation of conventional forms of discourse. The previous two books presented strategies for interpreting the inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture of texts without raising the issue of conventional form. The purpose was to organize sociorhetorical strategies of analysis and interpretation in a manner that showed their relationship to one another and encouraged people to use them in programmatic ways to perform sociorhetorical exegesis. As the analysis and interpretation proceeded, different but interrelated sociorhetorical modes of early Christian discourse began to appear.


12 Exegesis is the term regularly used for “higher critical” interpretation that keeps its focus on phenomena “in” the text itself (thus, leading [-egesis] ideas “out of” [ex] the text on the basis of what is in the text), rather than on reading one’s own ideas “into” the text (eisegesis). Sociorhetorical interpretation is intentionally designed to keep interpreters exegetically focused as they analyze and interpret multiple textures of a text.
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Rhetorical Dialects (Rhetorolects) in Early Christian Discourse

The special terminology this book uses for different forms of conventional discourse is “rhetorolect” (pronounced rhetórōlect). This term is a contraction of “rhetorical dialect.” A rhetorolect or rhetorical dialect is “a form of language variety or discourse identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentations.”¹³ The primary thesis of this book is that six conventional modes of discourse (rhetorolects) — wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly — contributed dynamically to the creativity in early Christian speaking and writing.¹⁴ Early Christians blended these rhetorolects into one another in the three literary modes contained in the New Testament: biographical historiography (Gospels and Acts), epistle, and apocalypse (Revelation to John). These six rhetorolects began to appear when sociorhetorical interpreters expanded their area of focus to the entire New Testament, beyond simply the letters of Paul, the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, which were the focus of earlier rhetorical interpreters. Different narrational patterns blend with different argumentative strategies in wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly rhetorolect. Gradually the conclusion has emerged that six rhetorolects functioned as prototypical modes of discourse that assisted early Christians in their energetic work of creating dynamic, adaptable, and persuasive modes of discourse within Mediterranean society and culture.¹⁵ Other modes of discourse beyond these six were indisputably at work in first century Christian discourse. The thesis of these two volumes is that at least these six functioned as


¹⁵ Insights from the chapter entitled “Lexicon Rhetoricae” in Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, c1931) 123-83 have guided sociorhetorical interpretation from its beginnings; see Vernon K. Robbins, Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, c1984) 5-12. The special focus on six conventional modes of discourse in early Christianity emerged through use of insights from Burke, Counter-Statement, pp. 124-130 in a comparative environment of interpretation that has included Hebrew Bible, Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Hellenistic Jewish writings, Qumran literature, New Testament Apocrypha, Mishnah, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Hellenistic Roman literature, and the Qur'an. Additional Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist sacred texts also have played a comparative role as a result of team teaching since the middle 1990s with Professors Gordon D. Newby and Laurie L. Patton.
primary modes of discourse during the first seventy years (30–100 CE) of the existence of Christianity. Perhaps other interpreters will gather evidence to suggest that one or more additional modes of discourse also were primary. The burden of proof for these two volumes will be that at least the six modes identified above functioned in a primary manner during the first century and contributed to the more complex speech genres that emerged in the subsequent centuries.  

One of the special goals of sociorhetorical interpretation is to nurture a “full-body” mode of interpretation, rather than to continue a tradition of body–mind dualism in interpretation. Special focus on the body has drawn attention to different experiences of the body in different geo-physical places in the six rhetorolects. This has led to the use of two recent theories that give special insight into the ways in which humans experience places where they live and blend their experiences with their thinking and reasoning. First, critical spatiality theory, a special form of cultural geography studies, guides sociorhetorical interpretation of the relation of the geo-physical places people experience with the mental spaces humans create and manipulate to understand and give order to their experiences throughout life. Second, conceptual blending theory (alternatively called conceptual integration theory), guided by conceptual metaphor theory grounded in empirical findings in cognitive science, guides sociorhetorical interpretation of the blending of the six rhetorolects in early Christian writings. In other words, these two theories help sociorhetorical interpreters give a new account of unity and diversity in early Christian life and discourse. In turn, this account creates the opportunity to describe and understand Christian life and discourse in subsequent centuries, including the present day, in substantively new ways.

16 For a discussion of primary and secondary speech genres, see Bakhtin, Speech Genres, 60–63.
Orality and the Body in Early Christian Discourse

Attention to a full-body mode of interpretation has made it necessary to begin with the sounds that came out of the mouths of people who spoke about the speech, action, and thought of Jesus of Nazareth during the first centuries of the Common Era. The sounds people produced in contexts where they made gestures and other movements of the body evoked meanings that the discourse conveys through narrational procedures focused on action and speech in time and space. The focus on the sounds exhibits itself in the use of “rhet-” words throughout this volume. The Greek root “rhēt-” refers to that which is expressible, i.e., that which can be communicated by being stated. People who believed that Jesus was the Messiah began with “expressible language” (rhētē glōssa), “utterance” in M.M. Bakhtin’s terminology, to describe the ways in which they considered Jesus to be special. The field of study that specializes in analysis and interpretation of “the expressible,” i.e., expressive language in a concrete utterance, is rhetoric. Thus, the field of rhetorical studies is foundational for the full-body sociorhetorical approach that guides this volume.

At present, many inquiries in the field of early Christian studies are dominated by attention to printed words and historical objects, without significant attention to the sounds people articulated as they gestured and moved their bodies in space and time to communicate their attitudes, hopes, fears, beliefs, and arguments. With the aid of multiple efforts, interpretation attentive to the oral activity of early Christians has begun to move toward the center of the field. Once interpreters be-

20 See the “rhēt-” words in Polybius, Histories 32.6.7 (to give a stated [rhētēn] answer); Plato, Theatetus 205d, 205e (syllables are expressible [rhē tē]); Epistles 341c (subject matter that admits of verbal expression [rhētēn]), 341d (things which can be stated [rhēta]).

21 Bakhtin, Speech Genres, 84-102.


gan to focus on the orality of early Christian discourse, a major challenge emerged to overcome an artificial division between “the living oral tradition” and “the dead written tradition.” Rhetorical studies have helped us to understand the difference between an “oral culture” and a “rhetorical culture.” People in an oral culture have never seen their language written with signs, like an alphabet. For them, their “language” is a sequence of sounds. People in a rhetorical culture, in contrast, know that “writings” exist, even if they themselves depend completely on sounds for their communication. Early Christians were aware that writings existed. This knowledge of writing means they lived in a rhetorical rather than oral culture. When people spoke, they often referred to written speech, and on occasion they recited written speech. When people wrote, they regularly composed oral speech that they attributed to various people, and they imitated oral speech in their own narration. Extensive portions of the Gospels and Acts are exercises in producing oral speech in written form. In addition, it is likely that Paul spoke his letters, and one or more scribes composed written communication out of his oral speech. When these written compositions were transported to various communities, people in those contexts read Paul’s letters to people who gathered to hear them. Even the Gospels and Acts would have been experienced by people orally as a person performed a written composition in their midst. The Revelation to John explicitly presupposes that the people who receive blessing from it will receive blessing in a context where it is read aloud (Rev 1:3). Overall, the NT writings emerged in a context where people knew that writings existed, even if they could neither read nor write, 

24 Kelber’s initial book promulgated a view that living discourse died when it was written down, but Kelber himself has gradually revised this point of view.
29 According to Rev 1:3, both those who read the words aloud will be blessed and those who hear the words and do them.
and where a majority of people created new compositions by dynamically interrelating oral and written discourse, whether they were speaking or writing.

It is important, then, to approach early Christian writings as compositions that emerged in contexts where orality was dynamically at work in practices of writing. This is such a daunting task that Bernard Brandon Scott and Margaret Dean started a program of “sound mapping” of early Christian literature for the purpose of “ear training” that might allow interpreters to appropriate at least some insights that can inform our work.\(^{30}\) It is necessary to perform various exercises with the New Testament writings to draw as closely as possible to them as compositions that have not gone through the stages of modern production of books, magazines, newspapers, and newsletters.

Another dimension that must inform a full-body mode of interpretation is the social, cultural, ideological, and religious geography of early Christian discourse. The sounds early Christians produced in contexts of gestures and movements of the body occurred not simply in “natural geographical locations but in places formed and nurtured as social, cultural, ideological, and religious spaces. This requires extensive use of the social sciences in the context of rhetorical analysis and interpretation\(^{31}\) and particular use of the tools of “critical spatiality theory” and “conceptual blending theory” referred to above (nn. 11-13). Many guidelines for use of the social sciences in sociorhetorical interpretation are present in the chapters on social, cultural, and ideological texture in The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse and Exploring the Texture of Texts.\(^{32}\) Additional guidelines emerge in this volume.

The reconceptualization of early Christian culture as a rhetorical culture with multiple social, cultural, and ideological contexts has deep ramifications for our work. Averil Cameron has helped to pave the way for our work with her Sather Lectures published in 1991. She reveals in


\(^{32}\) Robbins, Tapestry, 144-236; idem, Exploring, 71-119.
her opening words that she understands the deep relation of spoken and written discourse to historical interpretation:

It is no longer a novelty to hold that societies have characteristic discourses or “plots,” or that the development and control of a given discourse may provide a key to social power, or even that an inquiry into the dissemination of knowledge by oral or written means ought to be high on the agenda for historians.\textsuperscript{33}

To this she adds:

Finding suitable terminology is difficult. Rather than a single Christian discourse, there was rather a series of overlapping discourses always in a state of adaptation and adjustment, and always ready to absorb in a highly opportunistic manner whatever might be useful from secular rhetoric and vocabulary.\textsuperscript{34}

The topic of the book you are reading is the earliest period of the creation of these overlapping discourses by early Christians. In rhetorical terms, this means that the book focuses on the “invention” of early Christian discourse. The term invention is used here in its technical rhetorical sense: the topical, figurative, and argumentative resources early Christians used to create their speech, action, and thought.\textsuperscript{35}

In a book entitled \textit{Dying for God}, Daniel Boyarin has taken additional steps that help us to conceptualize the issues more deeply. He begins by exploring relationships between Judaism and Christianity in terms of “family resemblance as a semantic, logical category.”\textsuperscript{36} He proposes a “wave theory of Christian-Jewish history,” built on an assumption that “an innovation takes place at a certain location and then spreads like a wave from that site to others, almost in the fashion of a stone thrown into a pond.”\textsuperscript{37} In the terms of Bakhtin, humans use discourses in ways that send them centrifugally out from local contexts into multiple contexts throughout inhabited regions of the world.\textsuperscript{38}

As Boyarin sets the stage for his analysis and interpretation, he recites and interprets an account in the Babylonian Talmud that his teacher, Professor Saul Lieberman, had connected with the well-known talmudic story of the excommunication of Rabbi Eli’ezer. The story is as follows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Cameron, \textit{Christianity}, 5.
  \item Boyarin, \textit{Dying}, 9.
  \item Bakhtin, \textit{Speech Genres}, 60–67.
\end{itemize}
On that day, Rabbi Eli’ezær used every imaginable argument, but they did not accept it from him. He said: If the law is as I say, this carob will prove it. The carob was uprooted from its place one hundred feet. Some report four hundred feet... A voice came from heaven and announced: The law is in accordance with the view of Rabbi Eli’ezer. Rabbi Yeho-shua’ stood on his feet and said “it [the Torah] is not in heaven.” Baba Metsi’i’a 59a”

Boyarin suggests that “it was precisely the manner of Rabbi Eli’ezer’s support for his position, via quasi-prophetic or magical means, that so enraged the Rabbis.” This is, in my view, a keen insight into the nature of the relation of Jewish and Christian discourse by the end of the 1st century CE. In the terms I use for sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation, Rabbi Eli’ezer’s response interwove miracle, prophetic, and apocalyptic rhetorolect in a manner highly characteristic of early Christian argumentation. When he did this, the Rabbis recognized that he enacted a discursive practice characteristic of the sector of Judaism associated with Jesus the Nazarene, rather than characteristic of “rabinic discourse.” In other words, my thesis is that a particular blending of multiple rhetorolects is the distinctive sociorhetorical characteristic of early Christian discourse.

The preceding discussion means that in the midst of the new social, cultural, rhetorical, and ideological modes of interpretation that have emerged during the last three decades, sociorhetorical interpretation has accepted a special challenge. The challenge is to analyze, exhibit, and interpret the manner in which early Christians reconfigured biblical, Jewish, and Greco-Roman modes of discourse into their own distinctive, dynamic, and multivalent mode of discourse. From one angle, the NT writings exhibit an invasion of Hebrew Bible discourse into Mediterranean biographical historiography, epistle, and apocalypse. From another angle, they exhibit an invasion of Mediterranean biographical historiography, epistle, and apocalypse into Hebrew Bible discourse. This happened because, written in Greek, these Christian compositions emerged out of dynamic interaction among multiple kinds of oral and written discourses in the Mediterranean world during the first century CE. The view in this book is that wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly rhetorolects were primary mediators of this process. During the first century, early Christians filled these modes of discourse with action, speech, and thought attributed to God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit and the followers of Jesus to negotiate social, cultural, and ideological relationships in the contexts in which they lived. This new discourse functioned as a major resource for sec-

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39 Boyarin, Dying, 33.
40 Boyarin, Dying, 32.
ond and third century discourse, which helped to set the stage for an empire-wide Christian culture that emerged in multiple forms from the fourth century through the Medieval period.

The Social, Cultural, and Ideological Geography of Earliest Christianity

In addition to its focus on the expressible (rhetorical) nature of early Christian discourse, i.e., its use of that which is conventional (meaningful) to express that which is distinctive, sociorhetorical interpretation focuses on the social, cultural, ideological, and religious geography of early Christian discourse. This “geography” of early Christian discourse emerges in the context of two special axes of God’s confrontation of humans: God’s created world, which exists in God’s time, and the inhabited world, which exists in human chronological time. In other words, in contrast to the social geography of classical discourse, which featured the courtroom, the political assembly, and the civil ceremony in local city-state contexts, early Christian discourse features the social, cultural, ideological, and religious geography of the overall context of intersubjective bodies, households, villages, synagogues, cities, temples, kingdoms, and empires in which they lived and which they imagined. It was not decisions and declarations in courtrooms, political assemblies, and civil ceremonies that established the sociorhetorical discourse of early Christians, but the decisions and declarations of God concerning intersubjective bodies, households, country-villages, synagogues, cities, temples, kingdoms, and empires. In other words, the “institutionalized” human realm they experienced in the Mediterranean world was not dominated by the institutions of the Greek city-state but by basic institutions of life in the Mediterranean world. Early Christians expressed themselves in terms that were meaningful in the “everyday” social, cultural, ideological, and religious contexts in which they lived in the inhabited realm of God’s world.


A major reason early Christians created distinctive rhetorics was that they could not depend on civil courtrooms, political assemblies, and ceremonies to “hear their cases” equitably, exhort people to make decisions that would protect environments in which they could live safely and happily, and celebrate values that would affirm, nurture, and inspire people to think and act in ways that would build positive relationships and actions in the contexts in which they lived. All too often, the civil locations of courtroom, political assembly, and civil ceremony brought punishment, defeat, and celebration of values that threatened rather than nurtured their lives and their households. In this context, early Christians created discourses that “thought beyond and outside” the local contexts of the courtroom, political assembly, and civil ceremony to the location of the inhabited world in God’s cosmos. When early Christians were being taken before a civil judge and jury, they had their own discourse that enabled them to think and speak beyond this local context. When they were hearing political speeches designed to mobilize people to rebel or to begin a new political movement, they were thinking beyond this local context to God’s leadership of them in the “everyday” social, cultural, and ideological institutions of the Mediterranean world. When they were seeing and hearing civil ceremonies that celebrated the birthday of the emperor, dedicated a temple to a Hellenistic-Roman deity, or commemorated the death of a general, they were thinking beyond these local contexts to celebrations of God’s creation of intersubjective bodies, of God’s guidance of households, of God’s feeding of villages, of God’s redistribution of goods in cities, of God’s establishment of new leadership in kingdoms, and of God’s establishment of a new empire. These alternative modes of believing and reasoning nurtured, strengthened, and sustained them in a world where major alternative value systems guided other people in the contexts in which they lived.

This means that first-century Christians, living in the context of Mediterranean society and culture, created a new paideia by shifting the topography of their argumentation from local courtrooms, political assemblies, and civil ceremonies to the broad conceptual contexts of intersubjective bodies, households, villages, synagogues, cities, temples, kingdoms, and empires in the inhabited human world. The phrase “to-
pography" of argumentation builds on the insight that different rhetorolects contain different configurations of specific, common, and final “topics” (topoi) or “locations of thought and action” (loci) to negotiate the social, cultural, and ideological contexts in which they functioned. Classical rhetoric was formulated on the basis of “the speech” delivered in the institutionalized contexts of the city state: courtroom, political assembly, and civil ceremony. Hellenistic-Roman rhetoric broadened its compositional focus beyond the speech to epistle, historiography, chreia, fable, narrative, maxim, essay, and declamation. In this context, Hellenistic-Roman rhetoricians began to expand their conceptual location of social geography beyond the courtroom, political assembly, and civil ceremony. The view in this book is that early Christian discourse developed a spectrum of primary social locations that included intersubjective bodies, households, villages, synagogues, cities, temples, kingdoms, and empires. Presuppositions and logics about these social locations functioned in ways that informed the theological, Christological, and ecclesiological discourse they used to negotiate their social, cultural, and ideological relationships in the Mediterranean world.

Rhetology and Rhetography in Early Christian Discourse

Once interpretation begins to focus on bodies and geophysical locations, it becomes obvious that it is necessary not only to interpret reasoning in argumentation but also to interpret picturing of people and the environments in which they are interacting. This means that interpreters must work not only with rhetoric (the logic of rhetorical reasoning) but rhetography (the graphic picturing in rhetorical description). Very different kinds of persuasion are in process when a speaker calls a person a teacher, a prophet, a priest, a military general, a

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45 For this terminology, see James D. Hester, “A Fantasy Theme Analysis of 1 Thessalonians,” in S.E. Porter and D.L. Stamps (eds.), *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible* (JSNTSS 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 518.


heavenly ruler, or a liar, a deceiver, a fornicator, a wolf, or a beast. In other words, the picture an argument evokes (its rhetography) is regularly as important as the reasoning it presents (its rhetology).

Classical rhetoric is helpful as a beginning point for thinking about rhetography and rhetology, since its focus on speaker (ēthos), speech (logos), and audience (pathos) concerns not only reasoning but picturing of the situation, the speaker, and the audience. Yet interpreters have not taken full advantage of this threefold approach. The speaker and audience are integral parts of the rhetography, working interactively and dynamically with the reasoning (rhetology) in the speech. The reasoning in the speech, however, also will use vivid picturing (rhetography) to create its effects. It is essential to work comprehensively with the interrelation of rhetology and rhetography in analysis and interpretation of early Christian argumentation.

Analysis of rhetography in early Christian discourse has produced an awareness of the differences when a speaker uses language associated with households, kingdoms, imperial armies, imperial households, temples, and individual bodies of people. Each picture evokes special configurations of meanings that are important for persuading or convincing people to do certain things and not to do other things. Each rhetorolect contains its blending of rhetography and rhetology. A household is a place of nurturing and instructing people to live good and productive lives (wisdom rhetorolect). A kingdom is a place where bold speakers need to confront leaders and the larger populous to lead lives that bring justice to all (prophetic rhetorolect). An imperial army is sent out with a task of destroying regions of the empire that are perceived to be rebellious, for the purpose of creating peace and salvation throughout the empire (apocalyptic rhetorolect). An imperial household is a place where an emperor, who regularly is worshipped through special rituals, may have a son who performs tasks of patronage, benefit, and friendship throughout the empire (precreation rhetorolect). A temple is a place where priests oversee sacrifices to gods that bring benefits to humans (priestly rhetorolect). Individual bodies of people are “locations” where illness, suffering, and death may be removed to restore malfunctioning bodies into positively functioning, socially integrated, and miraculously renewed people of service and well-being (miracle rhetorolect). Rhetography, then, is as important as rhetology in rhetorical analysis and interpretation. Sociorhetorical interpretation as presented in this book programmatically correlates rhetography and rhetology in a text as it performs its analysis and interpretation.
Unity and Diversity in Earliest Christianity

One of the characteristics of first-century Christian discourse was to give an experience of “kinship” in a context of substantive diversity. Many of their images of kinship are grounded in the patronage system that created networks for distributing goods and benefits throughout the Mediterranean world. This study proposes that the overall kinship or “unity” grounded in patronage in New Testament discourse emerged from the multiple ways early Christians negotiated socially, culturally, and ideologically with people both inside and outside their groups and communities. Using conventional modes of discourse, they referred to God, Jesus, and holy spirit as primary agents who distributed goods and benefits throughout the world, and they gradually referred in their discourse to more and more followers of Christ as additional agents and mediators of those goods and benefits. Thomas H. Olbricht states it as follows:

In the Christian view, the world is the arena in which God (through God’s Son and the Spirit) carries out divine purposes among humans. In popular Greek thinking, the gods also acted, but since there were many gods, there were many goals, often at cross-purposes. In Aristotle’s view, God had no involvement in human life, and therefore, “humanity is the measure of all things” (Nic. Eth. 10.8). All truths, proofs, and positions are in the final analysis human. In the Christian rhetoric, in contrast, a recitation of the acts of God in the community of believers plays a major role, affecting proofs, arrangement, and style. That which is eternal is not so much immutable laws but the once-for-all actions of God.

Multiplicity in New Testament discourse is grounded in the complexity of God’s attributes and actions as Christians attribute multiple kinds of speech and actions to Jesus of Nazareth and his earliest followers, and attribute diverse functions to holy spirit in multiple contexts. Unity in New Testament discourse is grounded in a conviction that Jesus is the primary agent and mediator of the attributes, actions, and power of God, with holy spirit and followers of Christ in supportive


roles in the human realm of life. Among first century Christians, there was no overall agreement about the specific attributes and actions of Jesus that best revealed the attributes and actions of God and holy spirit. Thus, there was no overall Christological or ecclesiological agreement among the diverse groups that constituted first-century Christianity. There was, however, an agreement that God, holy spirit, and followers of Christ were the initiators, enablers, and powers through whom Jesus of Nazareth and the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ worked to redeem the human and cosmic realms.

By the end of the third century, Christians had used New Testament writings and other literature and traditions as resources for establishing a Christological base for unity in Christianity. During the fourth century, they argued that to understand the nature of God and holy spirit it was necessary to understand Christ as the center of the Godhead. The Christological unity that emerged during the fourth century marginalized substantive portions of early Christianity, with a history that comes down to the present day. Even Christians who are marginalized, however, regularly appeal to the New Testament to describe themselves as “Christian.” The New Testament continues to function today as a resource for diversity, for unity, for unity within diversity, and for diversity within unity. As a result of the nature of New Testament discourse, the kinds of unity and the kinds of diversity among Christians has the potential to shift rather dramatically in different times and places. It is the goal of this study to help the reader understand how this is possible.

Conclusion

There are traditions of interpretation that presuppose that the creativity of early Christian discourse lies in the arena of its mysteries, its areas of inexpressibility. In other words, the creative, radical nature of NT discourse lies in the things to which it points but is unable to express. This volume takes an alternative approach, namely, that the creativity of early Christian discourse lies in its ability to express in new and creative ways that which early Christians experienced and imagined.

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53 One thinks here of the hymn (by Bernard of Clairvaux?), “Jesus, the very thought of thee”: “But what to those who find? Ah, this no tongue nor pen can show. The love of Jesus – what it is – none but who love him know.” Called to my attention by David A. deSilva.
The thesis is that early Christians expressed what others might have considered to be inexpressible by blending and reconfiguring conventional Mediterranean modes of discourse in new ways. In the context of this blending and reconfiguring, traditional concepts acquired new meanings, conventional poetics acquired new forms, and authoritative rhetorics acquired new meaning effects. The challenge for sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation is to exhibit the processes by which this expressibility (rheticality) occurred.

It is not enough for a commentator to submit to the rhetorics of the NT. Rather, it is important for commentators to analyze and interpret the means by which its rhetorics have attained their power to influence, persuade, and convince readers, hearers, and commentators over the centuries, and do so still today. This volume proposes that the rhetorical power of the NT does not lie so much in those things to which it points but is unable to express. Rather, its power lies in its ability to express in believable ways things which others may consider to be inexpressible, and therefore unbelievable.