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GREEK RHETORIC AND PAULINE ARGUMENTATION

In a survey of Hellenistic Elements in 1 Corinthians ¹Robert Grant noted that in his use of materials Paul is Jewish but "his method is self-consciously Greek". Among the cases cited in support of this thesis he mentions two from ancient rhetoric: analogies and digressions. According to Grant the clause and sentence structure in 1 Cor 13 indicate "rhetorical skill" based on "a careful study either of rhetorical manuals or of some literary model or models". In this essay I wish to follow up Grant's suggestions and show that digressions in Paul's letters are illustrative of his rhetorical sophistication and that they serve to support his argumentation. This view runs counter to the current scholarly opinion that Paul's digressions are interruptions in his arguments and often carry him off into irrelevant material². Already in the third century Methodius, bishop of Olympus, had a sounder view of Paul's digressions: "... the sudden shifts in Paul's discussions, which give one the impression that he is confusing the issue or bringing in irrelevant material or wandering from the point at issue, ... (are part of Paul's) most varied style (*charakter ton logon poikilotatos*)... Yet in all these transitions he never introduces anything that would be irrelevant to his doctrine, but gathering up his ideas into a wonderfully harmonious pattern he makes them all tell on the single point at issue which he has proposed³".

In modern times Johannes Weiss considered digressions "a solid

1. Robert M. GRANT, "Hellenistic Elements in 1 Corinthians", in *Early Christian Origins. Studies in honor of Harold R. Willoughby* (ed. A. Wikgren; Chicago, 1961) 60-66.

2. F. W. BEARE, *St. Paul and His Letters* (London, 1962) 17.

3. *Méthode d'Olympe: Le Banquet* ed. H. Musurillo (Sources Chrésiennes 95; Paris, 1963), 3.2.55-56.

structural principle⁴” serving different functions. One such digression, 1 Cor 6:1-11, as Weiss saw it, served the function of “casting light on the main theme”, while other digressions, such as 7:17-24 and chapters 9 and 13, were means by which Paul moved from the particular to the general⁵. Modern exegetes have by and large ignored or thought to have refuted the idea that Paul’s letters reflected any degree of rhetorical skill. Conzelmann’s recent commentary on 1 Cor is a good case in point. On the one hand he can maintain that, despite the “breaks and joints” (such as those in 1 Cor 9, or 13, or 10:1-22), one can indeed “detect interconnections that are plainly from the hand of Paul⁶”. On the other hand, his argument for the integrity and unity of 1 Cor rests solely on theological considerations. By considering the form and substance of Paul’s argumentation separately he inevitably restricts rhetoric to the level of ornamentation. Hand in hand with this restriction, scholars have accented the irrational aspects of rhetoric⁷, manifesting itself in fanciful constructions of Paul’s allegedly sanguine personality traits.

Grant’s thesis must be seen against the background of sustained opposition to the idea that Paul’s method of arguing was self-consciously Greek. Bultmann had criticized Heinrici and Johannes Weiss for their efforts at demonstrating the conscious use of rhetoric in Paul⁸. Vielhauer in turn, while fully acknowledging the importance of rhetorical elements for the precise understanding of Paul’s letters, argues like Conzelmann that the rhetorical features in 1 Cor are not due to conscious rhetorical skill nor to literary ambitions, but due only to Paul’s school training⁹. I wish to show that digressions, as part of Paul’s

4. Johannes WEISS, *Der erste Korintherbrief* (Meyer 9th ed.; Göttingen, 1910) xliii.

5. J. WEISS, 145 on 1 Cor 6:1-11; 183 on 7:17-24; 198 on 7:29-35; 231 on ch. 9; 249 on 10:1ff.; 311 on ch. 13; 362 on 15:29-34. J. JEREMIAS (*Abba, Studien zur Neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1966) 289) sees in ch. 9 and ch. 13 digressions with different purposes.

6. H. CONZELMANN, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Meyer 11th ed.; Göttingen, 1969) 19-22.

7. Ch. PERELMAN and L. OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, *The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, 1971) 507-508.

8. R. BULTMANN, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe* (Göttingen, 1910) 2.

9. P. VIELHAUER, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin, 1975) 68. On the influence of the Hellenistic school milieu on the Nag Hammadi scrolls, see A. BÖHLIG und F. WISSE, *Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi* (Göttinger Orientforschungen, VI Reihe: Hellenistica, Band 2; Wiesbaden, 1975) 9-53.