

## BOOK REVIEW

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### ***THE CORINTHIAN WOMEN PROPHETS. A RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH PAUL'S RHETORIC.***

Dr Antoinette Wire

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Dr Antoinette Wire, Professor of New Testament at San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, provides a unique exploration into the social setting and self understanding of the Corinthian women prophets. In this important contribution to the reconstruction of early Christian history and theology, Wire demonstrates the fresh, new insights which Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca's 'New Rhetoric' can bring to the growing field of rhetorical criticism.

Her method entails a two-stage process. The first stage (chapter 2) concentrates upon what she terms the 'textual rhetoric' of the letter. Here she uses heuristically Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca's typology of the techniques of argumentation in order to discern in detail the strategies employed by Paul's *Quasi-logical arguments* whose persuasive force comes from their similarity to logical and mathematical models of rationality, but which are not truly formal since they rely upon nonformal theses; *Arguments from the structure of reality* which depend on relationships such as causality and the relations between people and their acts; *Arguments establishing reality* which make use of examples, illustrations, and models to argue from the particular to the general; and *Dissociation of concepts* which attempt to reconcile 'apparent' contradictory points within a position by appealing to a 'real', more authentic structure which shows their coherence. Based upon this analysis she can explore the implicit argumentative situations shaping Paul's discourse, in particular focusing upon the values and presumptions shared by Paul and the Corinthian community upon which he builds his various argumentative appeals.

In the second stage (chapters 3-8) she integrates the analysis of techniques of argumentation into a presentation of the broader argumentative dynamics and strategies Paul uses to persuade his Corinthian audiences. Breaking up the letter into six major units, she hopes to highlight its argumentative dynamics in the developing discourse: 1 Cor 1-4, in which Paul reconstitutes his wisdom *ethos* in order to assert his authority over the community; 1 Cor 5-7, in which Paul addresses what he believes is flagrantly immoral sexual behaviour of individuals, and 'judiciously' urges certain groups of now consecrated women to adopt the more socially conservative institution of marriage as the means by which to curtail such behaviour; 1 Cor 8-11, in which Paul ties immorality to

the issues of idolatry and the threat of pollution brought about by members of the community in their zeal to witness to the wisdom and authority granted through Christ; 1 Cor 11: 2-6, in which Paul considers the potential for idolatry in the authority displayed by women prophets and seeks to curtail it by adopting socially conservative dress; 1 Cor 12-14, in which Paul further curtails prophetic freedom by distinguishing and prioritizing among spiritual gifts, and carefully structuring and limiting forms of communal worship; and 1 Cor 15-16, in which Paul reflects upon his own resurrection theology and its social implications, arguing for the centrality of his gospel in the community which he seeks to guarantee by reference to his own network of social contacts.

Wire reconstructs what she believes to be the 'other side' of this discussion, and reflects upon 'self-understanding' and 'social situation' of those with whom Paul is engaged in argumentation. The central issue is the definition and resulting social implications of the role of wisdom in Corinthian theology: Paul and the Corinthians share a common theological foundation, that of Christ crucified and resurrected. Paul's rhetoric, however, displays the fact that neither he nor they agree upon the implications of this theology, upon the interpretation of the terms and concepts they share. Wire's contention is that the Corinthians see in wisdom the means whereby they overcome their previous socially disadvantaged position by expressing equality and power in the spirit. In contrast, Paul's own wisdom theology demands sacrifice, which results in the abrogation of the claim of social advantage and power. Both Paul and the Corinthians hold in common the example of the cross, the Corinthians define it in terms of the resurrection and the power implicit in a theology which emphasizes the transformation of the believer, a transformation having socially advantageous consequences. The rise of the social status of the Corinthian women prophets, achieved through the salvific transformative experience of Christ as God's wisdom, confronts Paul's own loss of social status experienced in the fluidity of the socio-political circumstances of the Roman Empire in the first century. In order to maintain his position vis-a-vis the Corinthian community, he argues for an understanding of God's wisdom as Christ crucified, a model of self-sacrifice.

One may disagree with Wire's conclusions regarding her interpretation of Paul's intentionality, her social and theological reconstruction of the Corinthian congregation, and/or with her reconstruction of the role of the women prophets in the community and the effect of Paul's argument upon them. It is nevertheless clear that Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca's 'New Rhetoric' as a method of critical inquiry has provided her with an enormous wealth of information and insight into the argumentation and its situation in Paul's letter. It would be rash to dismiss the method, even if one questions the particular results. Indeed, Wire has shown just how much the New Rhetoric has to offer the biblical scholar whose methodological interests have turned to argumentation.

With respect to rhetorical analysis she presents not only a detailed analysis of the argumentation, but a thorough appreciation of the effect upon it of the audience, both in terms of the immediate circumstances confronting Paul, and with respect to the shared values to which Paul must appeal in order to be effective. She is also careful to indicate the role of choice in Paul's argument, as seen in the qualifiers and descriptions Paul uses to present the Corinthians' situation, position and behavior in various matters. Finally, the analysis of

'structural rhetoric' details the interaction, order and strength of the argumentation as met with each successive stage of the discourse and provides and insightful coherence of the letter's argumentative strategies. Wire offers an impressive and persuasive presentation of the results which can be achieved through application of the New Rhetoric upon biblical texts.

In addition to this significant contribution, she includes 12 appendices encompassing a wealth of bibliographical material and summaries of research in areas such as: rhetorical criticism, early twentieth-century research on women in the early church, apologies for Paul's approach to social-sexual issues, ideological reconstructions of the Corinthian conflict, Apollos, wisdom, social location of the Corinthian Christians, women's head coverings, concerning the virgins, prophecy in Hellenistic churches, I Corinthians 14: 34-35, resurrection, and a selection of ancient texts giving evidence of women who speak for the divine in the ancient world. Wire's is a most thorough exploration into the social role of prophecy and women in the circumstances surrounding the Corinthian congregation, and into scholarship regarding these circumstances. The following critique is meant in no way to suggest that her work is anything less than a significant and promising contribution to Pauline studies.

There are certain aspects of Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca's model and theory which Wire did not make full use of, an important oversight since they might have offered her some help in her efforts at reconstruction. For example, a further understanding of Paul's position regarding the issues confronting him may have been achieved if she made reference to the *loci* (Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969], §§ 21-25) upon which his argumentation relies. Such an analysis reveals that the most prominently employed *locus* would seem to be that of quantity (best understood as that perspective which argumentatively defines reality by referring to duration, length, number): This would be the case, for example, in his thesis statements of 6:12, 8:1, 10:23-24 where he defines appropriate behavior by reference to benefit of the greatest number of people, in his reference to *universal* church behaviour in 11:16, 14:33, and in his argument regarding the nature of the resurrected body in 15:42 (the durable is better than the temporary). What does the reliance upon this *locus* suggest? It represents a particular *Weltanschauung* which is directing Paul's efforts at persuasion, one which Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca find most prevalent in conservative societies, one reflecting an assumption of the world which prefers the stable, the universal, the practical.

Another issue is whether the difference made in Perelman Olbrechts-Tyteca between persuasive and convincing argumentation, and their related audience constructs, might have contributed to her analysis. Paul is arguing *persuasively* when he addresses the values, concepts and concerns of his immediate audience, when he is seeking pragmatic solutions to the problems confronting him. On the other hand, Paul is arguing *convincingly* when he seeks out 'universally' valid reasons for his positions, and when he appeals to the status of (and therefore presumed values shared by) the 'elite' audience of believers (which is defined as 'those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,' 'all those who in every place who *call* on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours,' and 'those who are *called*, both Jews and Greeks').

We see examples of convincing argumentation emphasized throughout the entire letter, particularly in the digression of 1:18-2:16 (the 'wisdom digression'), 9:1-23 (an 'apostolic apology') and chapter 13 (digression on love), as well as in the final argument of chapter 15 (concerning the tradition of the resurrection). In each case, these digressions come at a point in the argumentation when pragmatic solutions concerning immediate issues facing the particular audience are then supported by providing valid, rational and 'universally' acceptable reasons. We also see appeals to 'universal' reason and the status of the 'elite' audience used in his *persuasive* arguments to secure his efforts to get the Corinthians to *act* in certain ways: His dissociative definition of wisdom and his hierarchical definition of reality in 3:18-23 are appeals to the status of the 'elite' audience used to secure his particular definition of the role and nature of leadership struggles (as he defines it) in Corinth. The many rhetorical questions in chapters 5 and 6 are appeals to the 'universal' audience in his effort to get the Corinthians to 'drive out the wicked person from among you,' and to keep them from bringing lawsuits against one another. The reasons offered in 7:17-24 are convincing arguments attempting to justify the persuasive efforts regarding marital status. Chapter 11:2-16 is a good example of a series of weak and even contradictory convincing arguments offered to justify his imposition of head covering for prophesying women. There are many other examples we could cite.

How would this insight have impacted Wire's analysis? One way is by noting that the overwhelming presence of convincing argumentation signals less authoritative demands at altering particular patterns of action, and more at creating a disposition toward action, an appeal to reason and thoughtful reflection and justification. But perhaps more importantly, a careful awareness of the difference between persuasive and convincing argumentation is the distinction between variously constructed audiences: Just as a rhetor must gauge her/his argumentation to the values and assumptions of the audiences/he wishes to persuade, so, too, is the audience a construction of the rhetor. Wire reduces all audiences, empirical, elite, 'universal', single-interlocutor, and self-deliberator to a single construct: the empirical, and that one to the interpreter (herself) and the his/historical (Corinthians/Paul).

Finally, there is one significant misapplication which should be noted: She makes an important error in understanding the nature of dissociative argumentation. Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca define dissociation as 'every reflection which, seeking to resolve a difficulty raised by common thought, is required to dissociate the elements of reality from each other and bring about a new organization of data. By dissociating, among elements described in the same way, the real from the apparent, we move in the direction of elaborating a philosophical reality which is opposed to the reality of common sense' (Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, p. 54). This is distinct from arguments which attempt to sever the connecting links between notions which were 'improperly' associated through previous argumentation. The difference results in the classification of philosophical pairs (appearance/reality), as opposed to antithetical pairs (bad/good) and classificatory pairs (north/south). Wire's classification of dissociative arguments, for the most part, shows antithetical and classificatory pairs: private/public, self-benefit/community benefit, shame/honor, human/divine. The only clearly philosophical pair is thought/reality, which is similar to appearance/reality. A more careful understanding of dissociative

argumentation may have helped her gain greater clarity of the issues and theses for which (and against which) Paul is arguing: Since dissociation means someone has indicated an apparent contradiction or incompatibility regarding a particular argumentative position, the resultant clarification not only tells us something of the originally incompatible position, but also of the more significant aspects which the rhetor is attempting to adhere to and maintain. In the case of *dissociative* argumentation the issues aren't clear, the values are not obvious, and the behavior is not apparently inappropriate. Paul is forced into the position of clarification: *He* is behaving inappropriately according to shared ('obvious') standards, not the Corinthians, and *he* is on the defensive. His response is therefore an attempt at justification, but also an attempt at changing the ground rules, at turning the tables.

Given these important correctives, one should nevertheless note the significant contributions which Wire has made with this excellent book. It serves as an important and formidable example of the contribution the New Rhetoric can make to the field of rhetorical criticism.

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