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Philip H. Kern:

*Rhetoric and Galatians: Assessing an Approach to Paul's Epistles*

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Philip Kern's *Rhetoric and Galatians* goes further than assessing an approach to Paul's epistles; it assesses a wide range of rhetorical and literary readings of Paul's epistles in order to establish their inadequacy and argue for an improved methodology: "Further study in several spheres is warranted by the conclusions of this thesis" (p. 260). Kern singles out three areas of new development in his conclusion: (1) historical reconstructions of Paul's world, which are removing inapplicable versions of rhetoric from the methods used to analyze Paul's letters; (2) related studies of the social milieu in which Paul creates and invents new communicative forms using a variety of resources, leading to a better understanding of Paul's rhetoric from within its own terms and strategies; and (3) an improved appreciation of Paul's rhetorical uses of narrative: "Narrative theory may offer much to the reader who wishes to explore the impact of Galatians 1-2 not as first-century oratory but as a living text" (p. 260). Spanning ancient and modern approaches to Biblical rhetoric in general, and Pauline rhetoric in particular, Kern's study provides a wonderful bibliographical resource for scholars working in comparative and Biblical rhetorical studies. Joining others working in New Testament rhetorical criticism and theory, Kern calls for an abandonment of conventional classical rhetorical models in approaching Paul's letters. Instead, he proposes, we should look from within Paul's letters for clues to their construction, genres, styles, and implied audiences. Many of the letters directly address the status of their own language; Paul's authority; how members of the communities to whom they are addressed should use and understand language; and God's role as ultimate author of truth and meaning. Augustine, Kern points out, was one of the earliest readers to see how thoroughly these doctrines concerning authority, language, truth, and meaning in human and divine communication would completely alter the teachings and practices of classical rhetoric (pp. 190-196). Throughout his discussions, Kern defines a number of meanings and kinds of rhetoric as he enjoins scholars to abandon any simple classically based model as a methodology for reading Paul's letters.

Galatians is a particularly apt choice for studying Paul's "communicative strategies", one of the alternative terms Kern uses to denote rhetoric. The culture of Galatia was among the most diverse addressed by Paul, as well as being an area with which he was familiar. Even the multiple audiences of Romans cannot compete with Galatians, addressed not just to a city but an entire region that comprised Greeks, Hellenized Jews, natives of Jerusalem traveling, trading, and emigrating in the wake of Roman persecution, and a variety of communities that would eventually come to call themselves Christian. Using Galatians as a case study for larger issues, Kern builds his book sensibly around the methodological and theoretical issues that scholars working in this area should know before plunging into the primary texts. Following a lucid Chapter One ("Introduction", pp. 1-6), Chapter Two ("Towards a Definition of Rhetoric", pp. 7-38) presents multiple definitions of rhetoric drawing on classical and subsequent models, and

pointing out the now limitless meanings of the term. What is it to ‘teach’ or to ‘learn’ rhetoric? How do we know that Paul is ‘using’ rhetoric, or that he studied it, or that his epistles are rhetorical? Only occasionally Kern forces an antithesis such as “first-century oratory versus living speech” (p. 260), but when he does so it usually provokes an improved understanding of multiple genres: Paul’s letters can be understood as both living speech and first-century oratory, depending on the definitions. Chapter Three (“Methods of Rhetorical Analysis and Romans”, pp. 39-86), Chapter Four (“Rhetorical Structure and Galatians”, pp. 90-119), and Chapter Five (“Rhetorical Species and Galatians”, pp. 120-166) explore Galatians as a case study comprising three definitional issues that scholars must address: methods of rhetorical analysis, rhetorical structure, and rhetorical species. There is now extensive debate in each of these areas concerning which forms of classically-based rhetorical paradigms should be used in reading and interpreting Biblical texts. Kern’s assessments clarify the debate, most often concluding that it is hard to come by evidence that would prove that Paul ‘used’ classical rhetorical models. Therefore, Kern argues, we should turn away from our over reliance upon classical rhetoric as the primary basis of Biblical rhetorical study. One example is Kern’s challenge to Betz’s reading of Galatians as an “apologetic” letter based on the genres, “species” as Kern calls them, “outlined in Graeco-Roman rhetoric and epistolography” (p. 131). Other attempts to align Galatians with judicial, deliberative, and epideictic rhetorical genres are then summarized by Kern, who concludes with the argument that because there are so many contradictory outlines of Galatians based on classical outlines and handbooks, and because these do not agree with one another, “(1) Galatians does not manifest the structural elements that have been claimed for it and, (2) it does not fit any of the three species of rhetoric as described in the handbooks” (p. 166).

Chapter Six (“The Language of Paul’s Letters: 1. As Evaluated by Earlier Christian Writers”, pp. 167-203) and Chapter Seven (“The Language of Paul’s Letters: 2. The Contribution of Modern Studies”, pp. 204-255) review and assess the many studies of the language of Paul’s letters by ancient and modern scholars, including the much-vexed attitudes of classical philologists towards New Testament Greek. Bultmann and Diesemann, at the earlier end of the modern continuum, represent the somewhat romantic but also disdainful perception of Paul as, at best, a natural but untutored speaker/writer and, at worst, a clumsy craftsman. Later modern scholars have amended these views, but, too often, as Kern points out throughout the study, by trying to prove that Paul was actually “using” or “had studied” classical rhetoric. Early Christian writers, Kern notes, are free of this obligation to prove that Paul is as good as any classical orator, because they understand Paul’s movement away from the rules and assumptions of classical rhetoric, a topic that he takes up in several letters. Augustine is particularly well tuned on this point, and Kern explains him well, particularly his narrative of how he had to completely change his attitudes towards the language of Scripture in order to understand its truth (p. 192). In Chapter Eight (“Conclusions”, pp. 256-261), the themes presented in the introductory Chapter One and in Chapter Two are revisited helpfully, with clear suggestions for further scholarship that should define a less classically-based methodology for readings of Paul’s letters. A Bibliography (pp. 262-296), an Index of Subjects (pp. 297-301), and an Index of Modern Authors (pp. 304) supplement the ample footnotes provided within the chapters.

Kern’s study addresses so many engaging controversies that it is impossible to note all of them here. He narrates as much as he resolves the controversies, but his narrative is helpful and suggestive, and will no doubt provision further studies. The relationship between rhetoric and poetics in antiquity Kern presents as an antithesis leading to an impasse: neither oratory nor Paul’s letters have been well served by literary criticism (i.e. poetics), because they belong to genres too often not considered literary or of literary merit. And yet in his examinations of a

number of figures, ranging from Aristotle and Cicero to Kenneth Burke and Wayne Booth, Kern notes several strong ties linking rhetorical and literary stylistics, rhetoric and poetics. Since it is the style of Paul's letters that so irks classical purists, this issue would seem to be a central concern for scholars working in the fields of the Bible as literature and Biblical rhetoric. Included at many points in the genre/style discussion is mention of how much narrative needs to be brought into the field of Biblical rhetorical studies. But Kern overstates this point, and seems to neglect several areas of Biblical and rhetorical studies where narrative has been deployed for a long time. Among these I would note Cicero's exposition of *narratio*, as the opening section of a forensic composition, which builds upon Aristotle's frequent allusion to composing a convincing narrative, even a 'fictional' one, if the facts are improbable. Discussions of narrative paradigms in Biblical texts from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* to Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (the latter of these Kern cites) have been sensitive to differences between classical and Biblical concepts of narrative without ignoring the difficulty of adapting classical rhetorical concepts of 'fiction' to understandings of Biblical narrative. We should also remember, I think, how the redactors of Biblical texts were highly tuned to historical repetitions and resonances, which, in their turn, later interpreters approached as typology and historical allegory. What are parables if not rhetorical narratives in miniature? More recent rhetorical literary criticism has resumed the study of the rhetoric of fiction, a field that can easily be adapted to the study of the rhetoric of Biblical narrative. Kern alludes to Wayne Booth and Kenneth Burke at several points but not enough as the friends of his court that they are to his arguments for a restored poetics of Biblical narrative.

Kern's discussion of the misuses of classical rhetorical models in readings of Paul runs throughout the chapters, and at first does not offer any conclusive analysis of how we should or could understand or explore Paul's intentions. Can and should his intentions be reconstructed from evidence within the text and/or in his social context? Kern surveys a number of misfires on this point, simplistic find-and-match searches that note similarities and parallels between Paul's letters, variously outlined, and a diversity of classical outlines for rhetorical compositions. The details of the analysis of the parallel studies are enormously valuable in making Kern's point that "[d]escribing the structure of Galatians as 'rhetorical' again appears suspect. Not only does rhetorical analysis fail to produce agreement concerning the outline, but even more, the epistle does not conform to the descriptions culled from the handbooks" (p. 118). The methodological issue exemplified but not developed at this point in Kern's analysis is that similarity does not prove intention; *utens* does not prove *docens*, as the ancients expressed it. Paul's education, intentions, and awareness of genre cannot be deduced from similarities of structure or genre, or from apparent parallels between his letters and classical outlines. In studies of African-American rhetoric and literature a similar point has been made by Henry Louis Gates, regarding slave narratives – particularly Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* – which contain numerous rhetorical tropes as defined by rhetoricians, chiasmus among them.<sup>1</sup> One does not have to have studied rhetoric to practice rhetoric in recognizable rhetorical formulae. In such cases, however, the speaker's self-understanding may bear little resemblance to the definitions of the trained rhetorical observer. This seems to be at the nub of the issue. Can we not remind ourselves that Aristotle's rhetoric described already existing practices, many of which were untutored by

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates. *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 44-88 and 153. See also Gates's introduction to his edition, *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Penguin/Signet, 1992).

rhetorical instruction? The *utens-docens* controversy introduces what I see as the most overarching question suggested by Kern's study.

Kern uses Galatians as a case study for developing methods for Biblical rhetorical scholarship more generally. But his scope is actually larger than this. For those of us interested in comparative rhetorical studies across times and cultures Kern's study illustrates that what is true of studying Biblical rhetoric and rhetorical genres is in miniature a portrait of comparative rhetorical studies more generally. If Frederick Douglass and Paul both 'use' chiasmus without ever having studied it, does it mean that rhetoric is a universal of human language and culture? In some ways this is irrelevant to Kern's study of Paul, but it should be mentioned, because the study is a very good synopsis of the issue. Historians of rhetoric have begun to tackle the question of universals in several ways. George Kennedy's *Comparative Rhetoric* (Oxford University Press, 1998) addresses head on the problem of using a classical rhetorical model in studies of non-western cultures and the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, where Kennedy notes there is expressed a consistently negative view of rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Cited in Kern's bibliography, but not discussed in the text, Wilhelm Wuellner's several calls for an ethics of rhetorical criticism persistently ask the question posed in one of his titles: "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?"<sup>3</sup> Recent studies of Chinese rhetoric are working the comparisons in the other direction, and letting Chinese 'rhetoric' re-read western understandings and practices, much as Kern invites us to develop a reading of Paul's rhetoric on its own terms. Yet, in the end Kern's central proposal, that we abandon almost entirely the search for classical rhetoric in Paul's letters, is overstated insofar as it imposes limitations upon looking at Paul in a milieu that was saturated with classical rhetorical practices and understandings. Studies by Anders Eriksson, Stanley Stowers, and Antoinette Wire employ reconstructive methods to bring Paul's audiences and social settings back to life in precisely the ways that Kern advocates, without abandoning a discussion of Paul's genres and style that resemble, even as they improvise upon, classical rhetorical forms.<sup>4</sup> Certainly we should trim down our reliance upon classical rhetoric, but to abandon entirely an indelible element in Hellenistic culture during the formation of Christian language would be to diminish our understanding of what that language was reacting against. Stowers' recent work,<sup>5</sup> I would note, develops an illuminating account of Paul's uses of *prosopopoeia*, his shifts in voice, which, when detected more carefully, help explain what otherwise are discontinuities or even contradictions from section to section of several letters. It is correct to suggest as Kern does that Paul was not displaying his artistry when he 'used' *prosopopoeia* and other rhetorical tropes in this way. But as Stowers, among others, emphasizes, and I agree, Paul's improvisation is both culturally and theologically significant. He took existing forms and adapted them to deploy several different voices, as a dialogue within the letter. In this, Paul models as well as teaches different voices and registers for Christian discourse. If we neglect the

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<sup>2</sup> On this point, see also Carol Lipson and Roberta Binkley (eds.), *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), with chapters on the ancient Near East, Chinese rhetorical studies, and the Hebrew scriptures.

<sup>3</sup> Wuellner's title, cited in Kern, p. 292.

<sup>4</sup> See Anders Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof, Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians*, Contributions to Biblical Theology 29 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998); Thomas Olbricht & Anders Eriksson (eds.), *Rhetoric, Ethic, and Moral Persuasion in Biblical Discourse*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity (T. T. and Clark, 2005); and Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (Yale University Press, 1997). Antoinette Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: a Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric*, is cited in Kern's "Bibliography", p. 292.

<sup>5</sup> Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, cf. note 4 above.

forms that provided the terms of Paul's improvisations – Hebrew Scriptures; classical rhetorical genres, terms, and styles; the emerging gospel narratives – we cannot understand the full range of the innovations. In developing this methodology, I and others find proof of classical education or deliberate use of classical terms not so important as developing the eyes and ears to see and hear layers and nuances of meaning that Paul was developing on the spot. This view is not inconsonant with Kern's larger aims; however, what to my mind is an overemphasis upon disproving the proofs that Paul used or knew classical rhetoric distracts the reader from the positive points Kern is making along the way.

Scholars in several fields will find *Rhetoric and Galatians* a valuable resource, with its detailed but very readable definitions and discussions of current scholarship. There will be continuing debates about the relationships between rhetoric and poetics, past and present, including expressions of and reactions to the disdain many literary critics and literary theorists hold toward rhetoric as a lesser art and inferior genre. Revisiting the partnerships between literary and rhetorical stylistics will in turn help us reconsider the uniqueness of Biblical genres and styles that emerged in several periods in, but not of, the world of classical rhetoric. Literary scholars and rhetorical readers of literature alike will find themselves reminded by Kern's study of the longstanding location of literature, poetry, and fiction, as subdivisions and methods of rhetorical training. The questions posed by Biblical rhetoric and Biblical rhetorical studies will continue to vex Biblical and rhetorical scholars, both when talking within their own fields and when talking across fields to one another. Kern's study provides an up-to-date map of the territory, an innovative arrangement of the questions that should be addressed, and sound proposals for the directions of further inquiry.

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C. Jan Swearingen is Professor of English at Texas A&M University. Her recent research includes "The Tongues of Men: Understanding the Greek Rhetorical Sources of Paul's Letters to the Romans and 1 Corinthians", in A. Eriksson, T. H. Olbricht, and W. Ubelacker (eds.), *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press and Emory University, 2002), pp. 232-243; and "Rhetoric and Religion in Colonial Virginia: From the Great Awakening to the Declaration of Independence", in J. Andrews, *A Rhetorical History of the United States, Vol. 1: The Colonial Period* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), pp. 297-338. Currently, she holds a National Endowment for the Humanities Research Fellowship and is a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, 2008-2009.