SOME RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES IN ACTS 24:2–21

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Some scholars are currently questioning the value of rhetorical criticism for examining Paul’s letters, because letters, though influenced by the same general forms of argument as speeches, were not speeches. For what it is worth, rhetorical theorists apparently treated them differently. Although Paul expected most of his letters to be read publicly, such questions must be considered especially relevant when suggesting rhetorical outlines for letters.

By contrast, however, one might expect a writer like Luke to use whatever rhetorical principles he was familiar with in fleshing out the outlines of speeches in his sources, and the more literate members of Luke’s ideal audience would expect this especially in Paul’s forensic speeches later in Acts. Because Luke portrays Paul’s defense as successful (as he elsewhere portrays him as a Roman citizen and a competent philosophic teacher), we would expect him to take special care in constructing these speeches.

In this paper, I survey some possible rhetorical techniques that appear in the speeches of Acts 24. I focus here primarily on points where ancient forensic arguments may shed light on Paul’s defense and the


2 Of course, critics generally concede that appeal to such rhetorical patterns and ancient Mediterranean culture’s larger plausibility structures remains helpful (cf. Stanley E. Porter, Paul in Acts [Tübingen: Mohr, 1990; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001], 151 n. 1; especially Anderson, Rhetorical Theory, 127) (certainly we should prefer them to anachronistic speculation).
charges to which he must answer. Although my focus is on Paul's rhetorical techniques, I must also address the charges against him in Tertullus's speech in 24:2–8. These are necessary for the purpose of comparison and contrast with Paul's speech, an approach that would have been used by ancient interpreters familiar with rhetorical and literary conventions.3

I am suggesting only some rhetorical parallels and their significance for understanding the speeches, not providing a running commentary nor challenging earlier assessments of their rhetorical structure. Not surprisingly, the outlines of all Paul's defense speeches in Acts 22–26 fit general characteristics of judicial speeches, although this genre could exhibit considerable variety.4 Other scholars have suggested helpful rhetorical outlines for these speeches in Acts or focused on the suitability of their introductions.5 Because my focus is on rhetorical strategies that ancients would recognize and not simply those standard in Roman law courts, I draw from the larger ancient Mediterranean rhetorical tradition from classical Athens through the Empire. It is the ancient rhetorical handbooks that scholars most frequently mine for strategies, but other scholars sometimes challenge this approach by pointing out that rhetorical practice often differed from the advice of the theorists. Thus I have sought to provide insights and examples from a wider

3 Though comparison need not denigrate in epideictic rhetoric (e.g., Menander Rhetor 2.1–2, 376.31–377.2; 2.3, 378.10–26; 380.30–31; 2.6, 402.26–29; 403.26–32; 404.5–8; 2.10, 417.5–17), it normally did so in forensic speeches (e.g., Demosthenes, Or. 19, On the Embassy 174; Cicero, Phil. 3.6.15). For the rhetorical technique, see further R. Dean Anderson Jr., Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms Connected to Methods of Argumentation, Figures and Tropes from Anaximenes to Quintilian (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 22, 110–111; Christopher Forbes, “Comparison, Self-Praise and Irony: Paul’s Boasting and the Conventions of Hellenistic Rhetoric,” NTS 32 (1, 1986), 1–30; Peter Marshall, Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians (WUNT 2.23; Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 49, 348–353.
