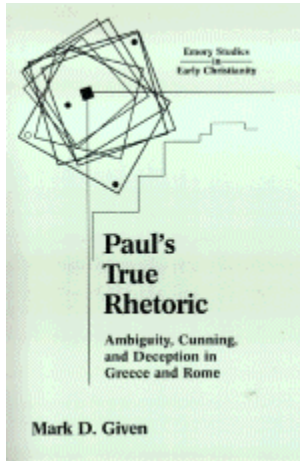


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Given, Mark Douglas

Paul's True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning, and Deception in Greece and Rome

Emory Studies in Early Christianity

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In this revised version of his doctoral dissertation, Mark D. Given argues that Paul's rhetorical strategies in Acts and in his letters display intentional ambiguity, cunning, and deception, and make him vulnerable to the charge of perpetrating sophistries. Paul's conviction that he knew the Truth and had a divine mandate to promote it in an apocalyptic world filled with deception explains why his rhetorical strategies are not irreproachable when judged by philosophical rhetorical ideals.

Chapter 1, "True Rhetoric", surveys some scholarship claiming that Paul was aware of the difference between a philosophic rhetoric of truth and a sophistic rhetoric of fabrication and argues that an absolute distinction between the two was compromised already in the rhetoric of Plato's Socrates. Plato and Aristotle contributed to an ironic rhetoric that intentionally conceals and reveals meaning simultaneously. This "True rhetoric" makes use of the sophistic strategies of ambiguity, cunning, and deception in order to deceive the deceived and lead them to the truth. While the Platonic worldview interpreted the ignorance of humanity as a result of the elusive nature of the sphere of becoming, Paul's apocalyptic worldview accentuates the deceptive character of existence because it understands "the god of this world" as a diabolically clever sophist. The Socratic Paul uses ambiguity, cunning, and deception to infiltrate a world dominated by these sophistic strategies.

Chapter 2, "Ambiguity in Athens (A Two-Act Play)", argues that Luke presents Paul as a cunning and deceptive orator. In the Areopagus speech he portrays Paul as a new Socrates, the returned father of dialectic, who exploits the sophistic means of ambiguity and confronts representatives of the major philosophical schools. A glance at the difference between Luke's portrayal of Paul and other characters in court shows that

unlike everyone else in the narrative Paul is like a new Socrates before philosophers (Acts 17:16-34) and like a slippery sophist before the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:30-23:11). Anyone who believes that the “real” Paul could not have behaved in this way must dismiss the rhetorical implications of Luke’s presentation of Paul as an orator.

Chapter 3, “Cunning in Corinth”, shifts the focus to the Pauline letters. After clarifying his use of historical-critical and deconstructive approaches, Given examines three texts in order to increase our awareness of Paul’s cunning in Corinth. 1 Cor 1-4 shows that Paul was a cunning rhetor who cast himself as the conduit of a spiritual wisdom which the Corinthians will not attain apart from him; 1 Cor 9:19-23 shows that he was willing to leave the bounds of a respectable philosophic psychagogy and sophistically enslave himself to the deceived ones in order to gain/save them; 2 Cor 2:14-4:6 shows that he in contrast to Moses renounces concealment, cunning, and disguise while at the same time conceding that his gospel is veiled to those whose minds are blinded by the god of this world. The chapter concludes with a discussion of “apocalyptic logocentrism” which assures that Paul would privilege Spirit and speech over flesh and writing and explains his strained and critical attitude toward the Law. While Paul longs for unmediated presence of Christ, writing and deception have affinity for one another in a world corrupted by separation and alienation.

Chapter 4, “Deception in Rome”, studies Paul’s ambiguous and cunning attempt to address actual and/or potential deception. This Judaistic deception was promulgated in Rome by false apostles. In the letter to the Romans Paul is not proclaiming the gospel, since faith comes through hearing, but exploiting a dead letter and writing’s deceptive potential to begin the process of deceiving the deceived. Given examines three passages from a kind of reader-response perspective. Far from being merely an encomium on the Law, Rom 7 ambiguously expresses also Paul’s more controversial and critical views on the Law. Paul expected some of his readers to detect what he was really saying, and some to hear a more positive attitude to the Law while being subliminally influenced through *insinuat*o. Rom 9:1-5 is read through the mind of a “weak” reader – an imagined Simeon. Given asks how this reader might have responded to the mini-encomium of Judaism in light of Paul’s ambiguous discourse concerning the Law in Romans. Rom 14:1-15:13 is read through the mind of a “strong” reader—a Marcion. Given points to this reader’s surprise and confusion over Paul’s injunctions to the strong. If Romans was a success, it was an ambiguous one that perhaps set the agenda for a discussion that would possibly take some surprising turns after Paul arrived.

The final chapter, “Reel Paul”, summarizes the main arguments and reflects on Paul’s apocalyptic worldview, rhetorical strategies, and theology. Given regards the “coherence-contingency scheme” as a faithful reflection of Paul’s schema as a True philosopher. The apocalyptic worldview and the rhetorical strategies go hand in hand. And theologically, Paul’s God is different from the idealized one of Plato. Paul is the apostle of the anthropomorphic and active God of his Hebrew heritage, “a mysterious, ambiguous, and finally *sophistic* God, who cares enough to be cunning and is devoted enough to be deceptive” (p. 181).

Given has provided a fascinating study of Paul. He brings out what many classicists have already realized, that the distinction between philosophic and sophistic forms of argumentation was not as clear-cut as often assumed. His study of Acts and some Pauline letters presents sufficient evidence to make credible that Paul in fact employed sophistic techniques of argumentation. Other recent studies confirm this (cf. J. S. Vos, "Sophistische Argumentation im Römerbrief des Apostels Paulus", *NovT* 43 [2001] 224-244). Regardless of what we think of Paul's worldview or theology, Given is one of the few who is able to deal constructively with apparent tensions, contradictions, ambiguities etc in the letters, explaining them by reference not only to psychological and social factors but to ancient forms of communication.

One major issue remains unclear to this reviewer. It has to do with Given's depiction of epistolary, written communication. Given rarely discusses the letter genre, and when he does, he characterizes it as a "dead" medium of communication, a substitute for personal presence, with an inherent deceptive potential. This seems peculiar. Firstly, epistolary theorists often relate the letter to oral communication. Given appears to be aware of this often repeated notion, because he starts his study by examining how Paul's oratory performance in Athens is encoded in Acts and because the sophistic strategies he discusses actually require an understanding of the letter as some kind of presence. In a culture where writing was never far removed from speech, it is thus unlikely that letters or other forms of writings had the intrinsic deceptive potential Given assumes. Secondly, while letters were closely related to speech, the epistolary theorists were aware of differences. One of the most significant recommendations was the need for clarity and appropriate style in letters. Philostratus of Lemnos explicitly discourages the use of covert allusions in letters. There are other comments of a similar kind, both earlier and later than Philostratus. Although some scholars have stressed the need to distinguish between a letter and a speech, Given over-interprets the distinction somewhat and assumes that the written letter is not clear but, on the contrary, thoroughly cunning, ambiguous and deceptive. As it seems, Given's discussion is in need of further refinement as to how letter and oratory interacted with each other while at the same time being two distinct media of communication.

Other, perhaps minor, questions may be posed. Is Luke's portrayal of Paul as an orator really helpful for understanding Paul's own rhetoric in the letters? Furthermore, granted the letters exhibit ambiguity, cunning, and deception, what is the rationale behind Given's own reconstruction of the rhetorical situation in Corinth and Rome on the basis of the very same letters? Or, to take a concrete text, what is Paul's notion of freedom in 1 Cor 9:19-23? Given does not discuss its significance and minimizes therefore an indication that Paul remained within the boundaries of philosophical (Stoic) respectability. Or, to turn to Romans, does the reader-response approach actually amount to anything else but an indication that one and the same text could be interpreted differently by different (ancient) hearers/readers, thus leaving the question of intentional ambiguity, cunning, and deception open?

All in all, these questions should not detract attention from the potential importance of Given's book. It is a bold study and, as such, it opens up new ways of

dealing with subtle and seemingly contradictory aspects of Pauline argumentation. In addition, it is pleasant reading, even for a reader not all that familiar with the cunning ambiguities of the English language.