Eriksson, Anders, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Walter Überlacker, eds.

Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts


Beth M. Sheppard
Southwestern College
Winfield, KS 67156

This volume includes twenty-three essays that were delivered at the Lund 2000 Conference on Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts. The sixth in a series of international conferences devoted to the rhetorical analysis of Scripture, this particular meeting focused on the means by which biblical authors present and sustain arguments with the object of persuading their audiences.

The first section of the book is devoted to questions of method and contains four essays. Although diverse in terms of the content that they present, the essays are nevertheless unified by a common theme, either implicit or explicitly stated, that use of ancient rhetorical methods as a means for explicating argumentation in biblical texts has only limited applicability. The first two authors, for instance, forgo historical rhetorical methods in favor of modern approaches. Frans van Eemeren, for example, has presented a well-written piece that adequately illustrates the tension created by the precision of formal logic and the ambiguity required in rhetorical argumentation. The study is an overview but does appear to indicate a strong predilection for informal reasoning. The analysis of formal logic is mostly limited to predicate calculus, and there are casual references to basic logical forms such as *modus ponens* that may confound the uninitiated. Eemeren does not tell us what advances in intensionalist or epistemic logic
might bring to bear on the analysis of argument. Neither is the field of epistemic logic taken into consideration in his accounting of implicit reason. The article may assist biblical scholars who view Scripture as argumentation to take seriously the challenge to recognize an argument aimed at gaining judgment as opposed to truth. Also, the work serves as an invitation to explore various models that can be applied toward the interpretation of sacred texts.

In the next essay, Vernon K. Robbins outlines a sociorhetorical method in which he identifies six rhetorical modes of discourse ranging from wisdom discourse to precreation discourse. Biblical texts are examined for their primary rhetorical topics within each of these modes and subsequently subjected to enthymemic analysis. As Robbins himself concedes, a challenge for sociorhetorical criticism will be to identify New Testament texts that are related in terms of these six types of discourse (64). Given that these modes may intertwine, it will be interesting to see whether consensus will develop among interpreters employing this method.

In contrast to the previous two essayists, R. Dean Anderson does not advance a new methodology. Rather, he provides an extremely well-argued caution against the misuse of H. Lausberg’s *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich: Hueber, 1973), which has recently been translated into English (D. Orton and R. Anderson, eds. [Leiden: Brill, 1998]). Anderson reminds biblical interpreters that Lausberg was not a historian of rhetoric but was writing for an audience comprised of those who interpret medieval and modern literature. Lausberg’s goal was to introduce the general rhetoric that underlies modern rhetorical study to his readers (75). Although suitable for the purposes of his own audience and even those who take a more modern approach to the interpretation of biblical texts, Lausberg’s synthesis of classical rhetoric blurs differing opinions among the ancients themselves and does not trace the history of developments in classical rhetoric. Those engaging in a historical-rhetorical approach are urged to rely primarily on the ancient sources instead. To this end, Anderson recommends the use of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a choice that is puzzling given that Quintilian was a contemporary of many of the New Testament authors while the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* is typically dated in the mid 80s B.C.E. Of the four authors in this section of the book, Anderson is the most positive in his acknowledgement that ancient rhetoric may provide insights for the interpretation of biblical texts. He does, though, note that such methods are limited in regard to analyzing the “communicative effect of rhetorical methodology” (69). By contrast, Lauri Thurén has contributed an essay in which he is explicit in criticizing the propensity to rely solely on ancient methods in analyses of biblical argumentation. As an alternative, Thurén advocates the use of modern methods and employs Toulmin’s model in his own exposition of passages from 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians. Some of the contributors in later portions of the volume, though, do successfully demonstrate that
ancient methods may be profitably applied in elucidating aspects of an author’s argument. Thus Thürén’s position, no matter how eloquently stated, is not necessarily to be taken as representing a consensus of opinion among those attending the conference.

The second major section of the book contains two papers in which historical considerations are addressed. Manfred Kraus offers a very helpful and concise exposition of the development of the enthymeme, while Carol Poster outlines some of the primary features that characterized the ancient letter-writing industry. This last article, however, which is distinguished by the readability of its pleasant prose, did not demonstrate any particular applicability for analyzing argumentation. Poster did, though, conclude that the Pauline letters were “not the works of the Graeco-Roman elite, but rather works by other subelite writers from the Greek east” (124). More detail concerning how she reached this conclusion would have been helpful.

With these methodological and historical considerations aside, the editors have grouped the next sixteen articles within categories that reflect the authors’ exposition of biblical passages from the Hebrew Bible, Gospels, Pauline Letters, and Hebrews. The contribution by Roland Meynet, which included analyses of both Amos and Luke, was ultimately placed within the Gospel category, though it might equally have been at home with the two essays on the Hebrew Bible. As was the case at prior conferences, such as the one held in London in 1995, works on the Pauline Letters predominate. Many of the footnotes throughout the papers that have been collected in this portion of the volume reflect the engaging dialogue that took place among the conference participants. They are worth reading. These sixteen articles reflect a wide range of interpretive approaches. L. Gregory Bloomquist, Russell B. Sisson, and Duane Watson employ sociorhetorical methods. Others, including Harold W. Attridge, Rodney K. Duke, Rollin A. Ramsaran, C. Jan Swearingen, and Johan S. Vos, profitably apply ancient rhetoric to gain insights into texts, though many also draw upon modern methods to supplement their analyses. Many other interpretive strategies are also used, from narrative approaches to the application of the theories of modern rhetoricians such as Kenneth Burke.

The final chapter in the book stands in isolation, since John W. Marshall focuses on the Shepherd of Hermas and the Acts of Peter, two noncanonical works. Each is examined in terms of the genres of apocalyptic and romance, the alternating use of which in the respective documents has persuasive force. The comparison of the two documents in terms of their romantic and apocalyptic motifs is enlightening.

In addition to the essays, the volume concludes with a bibliography of the sources used by the twenty-three authors (389–420), an “Index of Ancient Texts,” and an “Index of Subjects and Authors.” The indices do not include references to material in the footnotes,
but only in the body of the text. This is unfortunate, given the rich information that is presented in numerous content footnotes. This minor consideration, though, does not detract from the value of this work. Indeed, in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts* we have an important contribution to the study of rhetoric and Scripture.