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PAUL AND SOPHISTIC RHETORIC: A PERSPECTIVE ON HIS ARGU- MENTATION IN THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

ABSTRACT

In this article Paul's argumentation is analysed from the perspective of sophistic rhetoric. In the first section the question is discussed what it means to label Paul's rhetoric in his Letter to the Galatians 'sophistic.' To that end, an attempt is made to reconstruct the view of a contemporary critical reader who did not share Paul's presuppositions and who was well acquainted with the discussions in the philosophical and rhetorical schools about acceptable and non-acceptable rhetorical methods. This approach is compared with other approaches to analysing Paul's argumentation. The second section investigates more closely what it means when 'sophistic rhetoric' is used as a key to analyse Paul's theology. To that end, some models which start from a 'Platonic' view of rhetoric are compared with a model which combines a '(neo-)sophistic' or constructionist view with a 'rhetoric of power.'

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which it is helpful to analyse Paul's argumentation from the perspective of sophistic rhetoric. In the first section I will take up the question of what it means to label Paul's rhetoric in his Letter to the Galatians 'sophistic.' I shall try to define my position by comparing it with some older and some more recent approaches. In the second section I will investigate more closely what it means when 'sophistic rhetoric' is used as a key to analyse Paul's theology. I will do this by comparing 'Platonic' and '(neo-)sophistic' perspectives.

2. PERSPECTIVES ON PAUL'S ARGUMENTATION

2.1 Historical and modern perspectives

The analysis of Paul's argumentation has always played an important role in the history of the interpretation of his letters. It was, however, Hans Dieter Betz (1976:101, 108-111) who placed the analysis of his way of arguing — as part of a comprehensive rhetorical analysis — in a historical context. This historical perspective is characteristic of Betz's approach: he does not make use of modern rhetorical theories but analyses the letter in terms of the classical system of rhetoric. This approach has consequences for his evaluation of Paul's rhetoric. A clear example of this can be seen in his assessment of the rational character of Paul's arguments. Betz views the Letter to the Galatians as an apologetic one. The use of rational arguments and the appeal to reason are characteristic of such a letter. According to Betz (1979:30), "[T]he body of the letter contains nothing but one strictly rational argument." There are, however, limitations concerning its rationality from the perspective of the modern reader: "Of course one must keep in mind that Paul's rationality is conditioned by his time and its intellectual traditions and conventions. 'Logic' is certainly not above historical relativity!" (Betz 1979:30).

What this means for the concrete evaluation of Paul's argumentation becomes visible in Betz's treatment of Galatians 3:6-14:

To the readers of today ... Paul's way of arguing appears arbitrary in the highest degree As a matter of methodological principle, however, one will have to analyze both the quotations from Scripture and the meaning Paul finds in terms of *his*, and not simply our modern, methodology We cannot expect more from Paul's method than what was expected in his own time If we keep this methodology in mind, it can be shown that Paul's argument is consistent (Betz 1979:137-138).

After Betz published his commentary, there was a great deal of discussion on the value of ancient and modern systems of rhetoric as critical tools for analysing Paul's method of arguing. As Francois Tolmie (2005:1-3, 10-23) in his book *Persuading the Galatians* has already presented a survey of the discussion, I will confine myself to comparing three recent approaches.

In his book *Argumentiert Paulus logisch?* Moisés Mayordomo analyses Paul's way of arguing from the perspective of ancient logic. The subtitle of his book is *Eine Analyse vor dem Hintergrund antiker Logik*. His motives for this choice of ancient instead of modern logic show a certain ambivalence. One argument is the state of exegetical research: in current research the historical context is the privileged basis for understanding the biblical texts.

Accordingly, it is advisable to take this context as a starting point for an analysis of Paul's argumentation (2005:21-22). A second argument is the universality of the ancient system of logic. According to Mayordomo,

hat die antike Logik wesentliche Formen sprachlichen Argumentierens formal korrekt erfasst und ist darin noch bis heute gültig. Sie ist durch die moderne Logik nicht einfach ersetzt, sondern darin ... integriert und präzisiert worden (Mayordomo 2005:22).

As there is no research tradition in which modern logic is used as a tool for analysing Paul's way of arguing, Mayordomo finds it safer to begin with the first steps of logic. In my view, however, there is a tension between both arguments: if ancient logic is relatively timeless insofar as there is no essential difference between ancient and modern logic, then it is hard to see why one should follow the exegetical tradition of studying Paul's letters in their historical context. As a whole, Mayordomo's choice for ancient logic as a starting point seems to be inspired more by pragmatic motives than by ones of principle.

A position opposite to approaches such as those of Betz and Mayordomo is taken by Mika Hietanen in his book *Paul's argumentation in Galatians*. He uses a modern approach, the pragma-dialectical method, developed by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, as a tool for analysing Paul's argumentation in the Letter to the Galatians. His objection to the classical rhetorical approach is that it can become an anachronism. In the classical period, there was no single uniform rhetorical approach but various ones. Thus, the theory that is actually used is either a modern synthesis or an analysis according to a specific classical tradition whose connection with Paul is weak (Hietanen 2005:31). Against those interpreters who claim that classical rhetoric is actually 'universal rhetoric,' Hietanen argues that if one is analysing rhetoric from a universal perspective, modern 'universal' methods would be more accurate. Rather than attempting to make the approach itself historical, he suggests that historical considerations should be included in a modern sophisticated approach (Hietanen 2005:32). My main question with regard to this approach concerns the relationship between modern and ancient methods. If I used a modern approach such as the pragma-dialectical method for analysing Paul's argumentation, I would nevertheless be interested in the relationship of the criteria used by this method and the criteria with which Paul's contemporary readers would have confronted him. I missed a chapter on this subject in his book.

A different line is taken by Francois Tolmie in his book *Persuading the Galatians*. He does not choose a specific rhetorical model — ancient or modern — to apply to the letter; rather, he attempts "to reconstruct Paul's rhetorical strategy from the text itself, using the letter itself as the starting point" (Tolmie 2005:27). In his book he not only describes Paul's rhetorical

strategies but also attempts to evaluate them. Thus, he identifies ‘weak points’ in Paul’s rhetorical strategy. It may be clear that such an evaluation is not derived from the text itself. As we will see in the next section, the quality of Paul’s argumentation can be evaluated in different ways. The difference here from Mayordomo’s and Hietanen’s approaches lies in the fact that the latter identify precisely the set of standards they use to evaluate Paul’s argumentation. My question would be: What is Tolmie’s point of departure when evaluating some points in Paul’s argumentation to be weak and others strong? Tolmie’s analysis invites the reader to look behind the unconscious rhetorical theory underlying his approach.

I myself advocate a plurality of methods. A basic condition is that the method should be clear and well defined. The tools the interpreter chooses should depend on the goal he sets. In my book *Die Kunst der Argumentation bei Paulus*, I do not use the same tools for analysing as I do for evaluating Paul’s way of arguing. In the *analysis*, I do not restrict myself to the tools of ancient rhetoric but also make use of the rhetorical theories of Chaim Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca. In my view, they offer tools that are not developed in the same way in the ancient rhetorical literature. In analysis every tool that helps me to get a grip on the intricate argumentative strategies of Paul is welcome. As far as the *evaluation* of these strategies is concerned, however, my aim is different. I am interested in the question of the extent to which Paul’s argumentative moves were acceptable for the readers in his time. To be sure, opinions about the persuasive power of Paul’s arguments were extremely varied from the very beginning. I have chosen to shed light on one particular point of view to which too little attention has been paid in the history of research. I attempt to reconstruct the view of a critical reader who did not share Paul’s presuppositions and who was both thoroughly versed in Jewish Scripture and well acquainted with the discussions in the philosophical and rhetorical schools about acceptable and non-acceptable rhetorical methods. We could compare the competence of such a reader with that of Philo of Alexandria. From this perspective, I hope to be able to answer questions about the continuity and discontinuity between modern and ancient criteria for what is acceptable with regard to argumentation.

2.2 Rhetoric and truth

According to Betz (1979:30), the limitations of the rationality of Paul’s argumentation do not end with the different methodology of the apostle in its historical context. Another limitation has to do with the tension between the art of rhetoric and the truth. In antiquity “‘the art of rhetoric’ was considered to be irreconcilably opposed to the discussion of theological ‘truth’ questions.” To quote Betz at length:

As antiquity saw it, lawsuit rhetoric, like any rhetoric, has little in common with 'truth.' Rhetoric is the exercise of those skills that make people believe something to be true. For that reason it is interested in demonstration, in persuasion, in talking people into something, but it is not interested in finding out what the truth is. How can one be concerned with defending something as the truth and, at the same time, be disinterested in that truth? One cannot. It is, therefore, not a surprise that apologetics has never shown much respect for what one calls 'the facts.' It is only the defense strategy which determines what the facts are allowed to be. Quite understandably, apologetics was always associated with intellectual manipulation, dishonesty, and cynicism. It was always regarded as a handy tool of power-politics (Betz 1976:100; cf. 1979:24, 30).

According to Betz (1979:30), however, Paul was aware of this limitation and had found ways to overcome it. Characteristic of Betz's analysis is that he avoids describing Paul's argumentation in terms of manipulation, dishonesty or disrespect for the facts. Incidentally, he can say that Paul discredits his adversaries by using "the language of demagoguery" (Betz 1979:44-45), but generally Betz describes Paul's argumentation as reasonable and acceptable within the historical context. I am of the opinion that interpreters of Paul's letters should pursue this point of view as far as possible. At the same time, however, they should explore alternative perspectives. One of these perspectives is to see a much closer connection between Paul's argumentation and the 'art of rhetoric' as described by Betz. This line of interpretation goes back to Eduard Norden.

Almost a century ago Norden (1918:499 n.1) wrote that a classical scholar who reads the letters of Paul is reminded of the argumentation of the sophists. He refers to Jerome who, in his letter to Pammachius (Ep. 49 [48], 13), describes the difference between the polemical and the didactic sections in the letters of Paul. Characteristic of the polemical genre as described by Aristotle and Gorgias is that the orator uses the most diverse — even seemingly contradictory — strategies to gain victory. According to Jerome, Paul does exactly the same in the polemical sections of his letters.

More recently, Michael Goulder characterized the argument of Galatians as "a sequence of preposterous sophistries." According to him, the countermission in Galatia had the Bible, the church, and reason entirely on its side:

Paul won the fight against all the odds by a dazzling display of intellectual pyrotechnics, reinforced by his own saintliness and force of character and his converts' loyalty and distaste for the knife

We may be grateful to him for this outrageous logic and for so enabling Christianity to become a world religion; but we should concede that theology deserves a bad name if an acceptable universalism has to be brought at such a price (Goulder 1987:489-90).

Janet Fairweather, herself a classical scholar, who refers to Goulder's judgement, adds:

... it is certainly not a foolish question to ask how much Paul's argumentative procedures owe, directly or indirectly, to the Greek sophistic movement ... The fact that he argues one side of the case so forcibly, without even feeling it necessary, out of politeness, to concede that his opponents have at least the weight of tradition on their side, suggests heavy indebtedness to a tradition of adversarial debating, maybe even one in which people learnt to make 'the weaker argument seem the stronger', like the sophists of fifth-century Greece (Fairweather 1994:216).

She also reckons with the possibility that practice in arguing for both sides belonged to Paul's Pharisaic upbringing. She refers to the early rabbinic saying that "no one is to be appointed a member of the Sanhedrin unless he is able to prove from Biblical texts the ritual cleanliness of a reptile" (Fairweather 1994:217).¹

As we shall see in the next section, for Fairweather, Paul's Letter to the Galatians shows a certain amount of indebtedness to the sophistic manner only at a superficial level. At a more fundamental level she sees some clear differences from it (Fairweather 1994:230-243).

In my *Die Kunst der Argumentation bei Paulus*, I defend the thesis that Paul is a master in the art of "making the weaker argument the stronger" or — from the perspective of his opponents — "making the weaker argument *seem* the stronger."² According to their opponents, sophists taught "the ability to adopt the worse argument and yet win the disputation" (Aristophanes, *Nubes* 1042) or "the ability to make just things appear unjust and the unjust just" (Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Mathematicos* 2.46). From the perspective of Jewish tradition, the apostle defends a very weak position in the Letter to the Galatians. From a conventional point of view, it is an extremely weak position to maintain, on the one hand, the authority of Scripture and to proclaim, on the other, that characteristic rules of the law of Sinai are not binding, while denying, moreover, that the law has been given to give life to those who fulfil its commandments. Nevertheless, Paul succeeded in convincing the great majority of Christians of his position. On the one hand, it is true that most of his rhetorical and hermeneutical strategies and techniques were common in his world; on the other, many of these strategies and techniques could, from the perspective of opponents, be labelled sophistic trickery. In the ancient world

1 She refers to Lieberman (1977:305 [63]), who quotes *TB Sanhedrin* 17a and *TP Sanhedrin* 4.1 (22a).

2 For the meaning and the possible translations of this phrase, see Vos (2002:3-6).

people knew very well that it was possible to evade the law by manipulating words and interpretations. This was termed σοφίζεσθαι τὸν νόμον (Cf. Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 2.40). To give but one example, I will quote a passage from Sextus Empiricus' polemic against the rhetoricians:

And that rhetoric is against the laws is already plain from the statements they make in their mal-artful arts. For at one time they advise us to attend to the ordinance and words of the lawgiver as being clear and needing no explanation, at another time they turn round and advise us to follow neither the ordinance nor the words but the intention ... And sometimes they bid us cut out bits as we read the law, and construct a different sense from what remains. Often, too, they make distinctions in ambiguous phrases and support the signification which suits themselves; and they do thousands of other things which tend to the upsetting of the laws. Hence also, the Byzantine orator, when asked 'How goes the Byzantines' law?' replied 'As I choose.' For just as jugglers deceive the eyes of the beholders by their sleight of hand, so the orators by their low cunning blind the minds of the judges to the law and steal the votes" (*Adv. Mathematicos* 2.36-39; transl. R. G. Bury).

Paul's opponents in Galatia would regard every text used by Paul in chapters 3-4 of his letter as an endorsement of their own point of view. They would use the story of Abraham to defend the necessity of circumcision for Gentile believers, they would not separate faith from obedience to the law, and they would use Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 27:26 to convince the Galatians that it is impossible to have a share in the blessings of the covenant, the gifts of righteousness, life and sonship, without obedience to the law.

For a critical reader who is well versed in the classical discussions on the criteria for sound and unsound argumentation (Cf. Vos 2002:14-24) and who would use criteria similar to those used by Sextus Empiricus, Paul's argumentation in Galatians 3-4 would have all the characteristics of rhetorical manipulation:

- The apostle uses arguments — to use Aristotelian terminology (Cf. Aristoteles, *De Sophisticis Elenchis* 1 164a20) — that *seem* to be logical but are not truly so. In 3:10 the alleged logical link between the first and the second part of the verse does not exist.³

3 Cf. Betz (1979:45): "On the surface, Deut 27:26 says the opposite of what he (sc. Paul) claims it says." Mayordomo (2005:164-166):

Im konkreten Fall von Gal. 3,6-12 lässt sich eine logische Argumentation nur mit unausgesprochenen Hilfsprämissen rekonstruieren ... Die Prämisse in V. 10, dass kein Gesetzesmensch alle Gebote erfüllt, ist gerade im Rahmen allgemeiner jüdischer Vorstellungen über den Bund und den Segen der Vergebung kaum einsichtig.

- He uses false premisses, arguing from Scripture but at the same time separating what always belongs together in Scripture: the covenant of Abraham and the covenant of Sinai, faith in God and works of the law.
- He omits relevant texts: he refers to Abraham's faith without mentioning his obedience to the law and the commandment of circumcision (Genesis 17:1-27; 26:4-5).
- He uses exegetical techniques that can be seen as extreme opposites: on the one hand, in his interpretation of the word σπέρμα he uses the technique of understanding a term in its strict sense (3:16-17); on the other hand, he gives a daring allegorical interpretation of the story of Hagar and Sarah and their children, which displays the greatest discrepancy between the letter and the intention of the text (4:2-31).⁴
- He ascribes an intention of the lawgiver that contrasts radically with the letter of the law.⁵ Whereas the letter of law reads: "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them," Paul denies that the intention of the Lawgiver had ever been to make alive people through the law (3:21-22).
- He distorts accepted legislation creating self-invented rules that suit his argument. The rule that nobody can change a person's will, once it has been ratified, is contrary to legal practice.
- He adapts accepted legal traditions to suit his argument. Whereas, in the case of conflicting laws, it is generally accepted that later laws and promulgations have more weight because they imply the abrogation of the earlier ones (Cf. Cicero, *De Inventione* 2.145; Hebrews 7:18-19, 28; 8:13), Paul starts from the reverse principle, arguing that the law of Sinai has less validity because it came later than the promise to Abraham.
- By speaking in veiled terms and using obscure arguments he suggests a deeper scriptural meaning, which he has actually invented himself (3:19-22).⁶

If a critical reader would have had the traditional anti-sophistic arsenal at his disposal he would have attributed to Paul all the characteristics of a sophist: an impostor who had deviated from the truth, deceiving the Galatians with human inventions, bewitching them with dark arguments and spurious

4 Cf. the first argument in the above quoted passage from Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Mathematicos* 2.36-39.

5 On the relationship of *scriptum* and *sententia*, cf. Cicero, *De Inventione* 2.121b-143.

6 On *obscuritas* as a characteristic of sophistic speech, cf. Philo, *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres?* 302-303.

logic, juggling texts and distorting law. He would have depicted him as a flatterer, who is always moulding and adapting himself to suit another, trying to please the Gentiles. He would have characterized his argumentation as an attempt to make the weaker argument seem the stronger with one single aim: σοφίζεσθαι τὸν νόμον.⁷

In the most recent works on the argumentation in the Letter to the Galatians mentioned above,⁸ the category ‘sophistic rhetoric’ does not occur.⁹ There are, however, points of contact. This applies in the first place to Hietanen’s study. He uses a set of ten rules developed by Van Eemeren and Grootendorst to evaluate Paul’s argumentation in the Letter to the Galatians. Comparing his evaluation of Galatians 3-4 on the basis of this set of rules with the one proposed above on the basis of ancient criteria, my impression is that apart from the typical anti-sophistic categories used by the critical reader in my analysis, there is much in common. As I understand Hietanen, he finds Paul’s argumentation wanting with respect to principles. I emphasise four points that are similar to those mentioned above:

- Fallacious reasoning: many reasonings are based on problematic premisses, and conclusions are presented as self-evident, even when they are not (e.g., 2005:105-106, 111-116; cf. also the ‘abstract’ of the book).
- Manipulation of the scriptural evidence: Paul adapts biblical texts to suit his own theology and ascribes intentions to texts other than their original ones (e.g., 2005:106).
- Improper use of legal arguments: some arguments seem to be that of misplaced expertise (e.g., 2005:117-118).
- Unclearly: Paul’s argumentation is at points unclear and confusingly ambiguous (e.g., 2005:193).

This similarity can easily be explained when we realise that the rules for a critical discussion used in the modern pragma-dialectical approach are not essentially different from the criteria for a fair dialectical discussion as we find them in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The basic rules of such a discussion are (cf. Vos 2002:14-21):

- Discussion partners should take each other seriously. They should not treat each other as enemies who have to be defeated. They should search candidly for the truth.

7 In a similar vein: Given (2001: *passim*).

8 Cf. section 1.1.

9 For the problematic of this category, see Vos (2002:1-3; 2002b:217-220).

- Their reasoning should be logically sound and coherent, avoiding fallacies. There should be full agreement about the premisses.
- The argumentation should be clear without ambivalence and vagueness.

The relevance of this comparison between the basics of modern and ancient rules is that the use of modern criteria for an analysis of argumentation as developed in the pragma-dialectical approach is not necessarily an anachronism. The competence of an ancient critical reader could have been very similar to that of a modern reader. This, however, does not mean that Paul or his readers in Galatia were familiar with these rules. Nor does it mean that Paul had the intention to engage in a dialogue with the Galatians similar to the discussions in the philosophical schools — I will come back to this in the next section. It means only that it is not an anachronism to imagine a critical reader with this competence at the time of Paul.

Tolmie regards the Letter to the Galatians as a whole as “a masterpiece of persuasive strategy.” He identifies, however, some ‘weak points’ in Paul’s rhetorical strategy:

There are some instances in Paul’s argument where he does not express himself clearly or where he says things that do not fit or even could have undermined his argumentative strategy (Tolmie 2005:234).

As far as I can see, this does not concern the essence of the argumentation but only some minor points. In his summary he gives a list of six texts of which three belong to Galatians 3 (Tolmie 2005:234). Whereas my critical reader from his anti-sophistic perspective and Hietanen from his pragma-dialectical perspective find Paul’s argumentation wanting at essential points, Tolmie seems to adopt a less critical stance (Tolmie 2005:234).¹⁰ To use a term he himself applies in another context, his critical analysis of Paul’s argumentation can be characterised as a ‘milder approach.’ This raises the question of the criteria behind his system.

Compared with the view of my critical reader and that of Tolmie, Hietanen’s approach seems to be the most detached one. The category ‘sophistic rhetoric’ is a polemical one. Just as in antiquity the label ‘sophist’ often functioned as a negative label for a group of opponents, my critical reader expresses, with the category ‘sophistic rhetoric,’ his total disapproval of the method and

10 A more critical position is also taken by Dieter Mitternacht (1999), who makes an attempt to provide a defence for the accused recipients and designated opponents of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. He tries to unravel the strategy of persuasion from the angles of authorial intent and reader expectation. From this perspective he comes to the following conclusion:

the message of Paul in Galatians 3. His criticism is open to objectification: it is possible, as Aristotle attempted in his treatise *De Sophisticis Elenchis*, to describe the techniques of sophistic rhetoric. At the same time, however, his criticism is partial: it does not restrict itself to an analysis of these techniques as such but evokes a total picture of a sophist with all the negative connotations it has acquired since Plato.¹¹ My critical reader is not really interested in counterarguments. Tolmie's analysis, on the other hand, seems to be the result of an interpreter who has a more positive relationship to the method and message of the apostle. Because he, unlike Hietanen, does not identify his standards of evaluation, the reader has the freedom to make guesses about the partiality factors in his analysis.¹²

2.3 Rhetoric and revelation

In the view of Hans Dieter Betz a third limitation with reference to the rationality of Paul's argumentation has to do with the kind of truth the apostle is defending. Actually, "no kind of rational argument can be adequate with regard to the defense Paul must make" (Betz 1979:25; 1975:378). Characteristic of Judaism as well as of Christianity is the claim that what they regard as the 'truth' cannot, by definition, be demonstrated or defended. From this perspective the Christian claim to reason is "a deflected one" (Betz 1976:99-101). According to Betz, Paul deviates from common-sense rationality on three points:

Für den Nachweis der Richtigkeit seiner Meinung scheute er sich nicht vor pauschalierenden Urteilen und rhetorisch manipulierenden Implikationen zurück. Im direkten Bezug auf die Situation in Galatien, versuchte er, ohne genauere Kenntnis, Verhaltensweisen von Galatern und Gegnern mit Affekten, Drohungen und Verurteilungen entgegenzuwirken. Obwohl die Implikationen den Galatern (und vielen andern) als absurde Übertreibungen der gemeinsamen Vereinbarungen vorgekommen sein müssen, meint Paulus, ihnen vom ersten Tage ihrer Begegnung an, alles Wesentliche klar dargestellt zu haben. Gegensätzliche Perzeptionen der Sachlage werden von ihm in unvereinbarer Weise gegeneinander gestellt, massive, kognitive Dissonanzen hervorgerufen (1999:314-315).

11 Cf., e.g., the *Onomasticon* of Julius Pollux, s.v. σοφιστής.

12 As Mayordomo's analysis is focused on Paul's syllogistic reasoning, its scope is more limited. According to him, the logical analysis of Galatians 3:6-14 by means of Aristotelian reasoning is faced with difficulties. The main problem lies in the premises on which Paul's reasoning is based:

Das Problem liegt nicht so sehr darin, dass Prämissen als Zusatzannahmen rekonstruiert werden müssen, sondern darin, dass Annahmen nötig sind, die sich nicht ohne weiteres als enzyklopädische Basis-einträge verstehen lassen, die ein Autor mit seinen realen Rezipienten und Rezipientinnen ganz natürlich teilt (2005:230).

- First, his arguments are designed to demonstrate a supernatural *auctoritas*. Not only does he use proofs from Scripture which were accepted in a primitive Christian context with a very high degree of authority, he also uses the gift of the Spirit as evidence of supernatural origin and character (Betz 1975:370-71, 378).
- Secondly, Paul addresses the Galatians as people “who are endowed with the Spirit” (Betz 1975:378). This has a bearing on the understanding of ‘reason’:

By speaking in terms of the Spirit, Paul can appeal to reason — not only the common-sense reason basic to all arguments, but to that ‘reason’ which is especially endowed by the Spirit (Betz 1979:29-30).

- Thirdly, the apostle uses curses and blessings as a defensive weapon, thus introducing the dimension of magic (Betz 1975:378-79; 1976:111; 1979:25).

This tension between authoritative proclamation and rational persuasion is described by George A. Kennedy as that between ‘sacred language’ or ‘radical Christian rhetoric’ and logical arguments. One of the characteristics of ‘sacred language’ is the “deliberate rejection of worldly reason.” A feature of ‘radical Christian rhetoric’ is the doctrine that the speaker is a vehicle of God’s will and that his teachings are inspired by the Holy Spirit and by the grace of God (Kennedy 1984:6-8). According to Kennedy, it is striking to see the extent to which logical forms are used in the New Testament:

Though sacred language stands behind this ... and though a tradition of radical, nonlogical discourse survived in the Church ... even in the first century a process was underway of recasting expressions in enthymematic form, thus making sacred language into premisses which are supported, at least in a formal sense, by human reasoning (Kennedy 1984:159).

Applied to the Letter to the Galatians, especially to its use of scriptural proof, this means:

The whole labored argument essentially rests not on the scriptural passages cited nor on the logical acceptance of Paul’s premises by his opponents – a necessary condition in true dialectic — but on the Galatians’ acceptance of his authority in making these proclamations and their experience of Paul’s teachings (Kennedy 1984:149).

According to Janet Fairweather, this appeal to a divinely sanctioned apostolic authority distinguishes Paul fundamentally from pagan sophistic rhetoric:

One thing that sets Paul firmly apart from this tradition is his assumption of an other-worldly authority on the basis of what he calls ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ...

To Paul, πίστις was not a matter of opinion as it was for the sophists, but an absolute reality, deducible from his conversion experience (Fairweather 1994:237).

According to Fairweather, in Paul's time hearing an other-worldly voice would have been seen as an unusual type of evidence on which to base any sort of argumentation. Sceptics like Sextus Empiricus would not accept such evidence at all. They would object that proof cannot be revealed by a sign because the sign itself requires proof. Paul's first reply, however, to any who cast doubt on the validity of his πίστις was to recount the story of his conversion and to any in his congregations who would be sceptical about this kind of proof, he could appeal to the evidence of their own past experience of receiving the Spirit. That is why for Fairweather (1994:238) it is only at a superficial level that Paul's Letter to the Galatians shows indebtedness to the sophistic rhetoric: "[I]t emerges that at the most fundamental level, notably in the bases of his argumentation, his approach was genuinely quite distinct from pagan sophistic" (Fairweather 1994:1).

The relationship between argumentation and revelation is also an important topic in J. Louis Martyn's commentary on the Letter to the Galatians. Martyn discusses the two central aspects of Paul's rhetoric: On the one hand, the letter shows us an author who is a rather sophisticated rhetorician. On the other hand, Paul is consistent in his certainty that it is not his powers of persuasion that elicit faith. The power to kindle faith resides solely with God's gospel.

But that means that the gospel Paul preaches — bringing its own criteria of perception and plausibility — is not and cannot be a message by which he seeks in the rhetorical sense to persuade (Martyn 1997: 145-46).

Consequently, there are definite limits to the pertinence of rhetorical analysis:

Paul's oral sermon would have been a reproclamation of the gospel in the form of an evangelistic argument. At several junctures that argument proves to be very peculiar, however, because of Paul's conviction that he can proclaim the gospel only in the presence of God who makes the gospel occur, being its always-contemporary author. Rhetoric, then, can serve the gospel, but the gospel itself is not fundamentally a matter of rhetorical persuasion (1:10-12). For the gospel has the effect of placing at issue the nature of argument itself. That is to say, since the gospel is God's own utterance, it is not and can never be subject to ratiocinative criteria that have been developed apart from it (Martyn 1997:22).

A similar position is defended by Hans Hübner with regard to Paul's argumentation as a whole. Hübner makes a distinction between Paul's argu-

mentation and its theological underpinnings. In a review of Folkert Siegert's book, *Argumentation bei Paulus*, he poses some fundamental theological questions concerning the relationship between theology and secular science. Can theology arrive at the essence of Pauline theological thinking by means of the concept of argumentation? Where does Paul's argumentation originate? How do argumentation and the understanding of faith inspired by the Holy Spirit belong together theologically? In this context, Hübner does not give explicit answers. Rather, he leaves the reader to infer from his approach that his answer to the first question is negative: theology cannot arrive at the essence of Pauline theological thinking by means of the concept of argumentation, at least not with a secular concept of argumentation. Hübner views Paul's rhetoric as the "rhetoric of faith argumentation." That means: it is based on an understanding of faith inspired by the Holy Spirit and on the authority of Scripture (Hübner 1987:173-175).

Characteristic of Martyn's and Hübner's interpretation is that they identify themselves with Paul. They do not describe Paul's view merely from a historical point of view, but their findings have a normative character (cf. Given 2001a). I am not quite sure whether Fairweather's conclusions are meant to be merely historical or also normative. Concerning her analysis of the relationship between argumentation and revelation I agree and disagree with her conclusion that at the most fundamental level Paul's argumentation was "genuinely quite distinct from pagan sophistic rhetoric." It is undoubtedly true that it is not a characteristic of pagan sophism to use experiences of revelation or the gift of a divine spirit as an argument. If one looks, however, with the eye of my 'critical reader' at Paul's way of using these kinds of arguments, it can be said that it is genuinely sophistic. To make the weaker argument the stronger Paul uses every available means arbitrarily. While his opponents would have appealed to an experience of revelation, Paul would certainly have dismissed the argument. Right at the beginning of his argument in the Letter to the Galatians, he makes clear in no uncertain terms that an appeal to a revelation from heaven in no way can legitimise the gospel of his opponents: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" (1:8).

To legitimise the truth of his own gospel, however, Paul, without batting an eye, appeals to his own revelation experience: the gospel proclaimed by him is not of human origin, because he received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:11-12). Paul proves himself time and again an expert in the anti-logicistic art, the art *in utramque partem disputare*. He is able to defend one point of view as convincingly as its opposite. The only criterion for him is the *utilitas causae*, the question of whether it suits his cause. From this perspective Paul's argumentation in Galatians 1-2 can be termed 'pneumatic sophistry.'

When one looks at the content of the arguments, there is a fundamental difference from pagan sophistic rhetoric; when one, however, considers the formal aspect of the rhetorical strategy, Paul's argument can be regarded as typically sophistic rhetoric.

An essential element of pneumatic sophistry is the ability to immunise oneself against any form of criticism based in rational arguments: "The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment" (1 Corinthians 2:15).

What Betz says is true, namely, that Paul, by speaking in terms of the Spirit, can appeal to reason. At the same time it is true that Paul, if it suits his case, would dismiss every rational objection against his theological and scriptural proof as being 'wisdom of this world.' Interpreters like Martyn and Hübner basically accept this immunisation strategy, whereas my 'critical reader' would expose it as a sophistic strategy, as the ability to adopt the worse argument and yet win the disputation.

In my opinion, Paul would be open to following the standard criteria for a dialectical discussion only — and only then — if this would further his interests. Hietanen realises that this is a critical point. In my view, his statements on this subject reveal the tension that is inherent to the matter. On the one hand, he claims that the pragma-dialectical method is an adequate tool for analysing Paul's argumentation because the spiritual nature of Paul's message does not exclude the rational aspect:

I suggest that the spiritual nature of Paul's matters do not relieve him of rationality, and that Paul himself does not argue as if it did. Even though the ultimate argument is spiritual, being based on revelation, the intermediate steps need not be Paul clearly makes an effort to be convincing to reason (Hietanen 2005:71).

At the same time, however, he realises that there are different rationalities: "[I]n religious reasoning we must accept that the final argument is spiritual. This gives biblical argumentation a character which may not agree with standard notions of rationality" (Hietanen 2005:72).

In my opinion, it is legitimate to judge Paul's argumentation according to our own standards of rationality. We should realise, however, that Paul, as a pneumatic sophist, would accept these standards only if it would help him win the disputation.

3. SOPHISTIC RHETORIC AS A HERMENEUTICAL KEY

3.1 Platonic and (Neo-)Sophistic perspectives in rhetorical criticism

Broadly speaking, two antipodal positions can be found in rhetorical criticism. The first one is the 'Platonic' view, which is characterised by binary oppositions like inner/outer, deep/surface, essential/peripheral, necessary/contingent, things/words, realities/illusions, fact/opinion, neutral/partisan (Fish 1995:205). In this view, rhetoric is associated with the second part of these oppositions. The *verba* are the contingent representations of the *res*. Rhetoric is subordinate to content and concerns only the way this content is presented. Platonists believe that 'truth' exists independently of human opinions about it and the variety of words in which these opinions are expressed. They also assume that there are criteria for the distinction of truth from falsity that are independent of linguistic statements.

The second one is the '(neo-)sophistic'¹³ or 'social-constructivist' view,¹⁴ which does not accept such a separation between *res* and *verba*. From this perspective, "rhetoric may be viewed not as a matter of giving effectiveness to truth but of creating truth" (Scott 1967:13; cf. *idem* 1993:126). It is "speech that constructs and shapes reality, rather than reflecting it." (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:177) 'Truth' itself is a contingent affair. It is not found but "created moment by moment in the circumstances in which (man) finds himself and with which he has to cope" (Scott 1967:17). It is conceived as what communities are persuaded of at any particular time (Guthrie 1971:51; Fish 1995:207). Arguments are the materials of such a construction of truth. The orator is able to "make the weaker argument the stronger." From a Platonic perspective he does this 'seemingly' (Valesio 1980:92). From a sophistic perspective, however, rhetoric has the power to create and transform realities. Stronger arguments mean a stronger cause. Lawyers use every means available to reach their goals, such as obtaining an acquittal for a client. To that end they create realities and truths. In this case, the content is subordinate to the rhetorical goal. In the same way, in philosophy and theology symbolic universes are created with a view to influencing people's behaviour. From this perspective, (neo-)sophists are moving "rhetoric from the disreputable periphery to the necessary center" (Fish, in Olson 2002:95).

13 On the relationship between modern neo-sophistic theory and the historical reconstruction of sophistic doctrines, cf. Schiappa (1990) and McComiskey (2002).

14 On the relationship between neo-sophism and social constructivism, cf. Fish (In: Olson 2002:85-87, 94-96).

3.2 Pauline rhetoric from a Platonic and a (Neo-)Sophistic perspective

3.2.1 A Platonic perspective

As far as I can see, this Platonic view of rhetoric underlies J. Christaan Beker's attempt to find "Paul's abiding message" in the contingency of its various expressions. In his book, *Paul the apostle*, Beker proposes a method by which he attempts to maintain both the coherence or inner consistency of Paul's thought and the contingency of its different expressions. While his book devotes hardly any attention to rhetorical analysis, Beker does broach the subject in his article, "Paul's theology: Consistent or inconsistent?" Here he defends his coherence-contingency method as a *via media* between two extremes: a purely sociological and rhetorical analysis and a dogmatic imposition of a specific focus in Paul's thought. He welcomes the attention recent research devotes to the contingency of Paul's thought, the diversity of his letters with their multiple sociological contents, and the variety of rhetorical devices Paul employed in different 'rhetorical situations.' He puts forth a warning, however, about a danger this entails: "[T]he contingent situations of the letters threaten to eclipse the abiding message of Paul, i.e. 'the truth of the gospel'" (Beker 1988:365). If we were to regard Paul's gospel as an entirely contingent structure, Paul would degenerate into "a purely opportunistic theologian, who, with the help of various rhetorical skills adapts the gospel to whatever the sociological situation demands" (Beker 1988:367-68).

Beker (1988:368) reminds the reader of "the legitimate value of the Reformers' search for a *Mitte* in Paul's gospel, which was for them a search to clarify the truth of the gospel."

Beker's treatment of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis concentrates only on the contingent aspect of Paul's gospel, not on its coherent core. I agree entirely with Paul Meyer's observation regarding such attempts to distinguish between the 'contingent' form and the 'coherent' elements in Paul's theology:

[W]hat is at stake is to identify not only what controls or shapes the apostle's argument at any given moment but also what can so transcend the limitations of historical contingency as to supply warrant for its truth and reliability (Meyer 1997:147).

A much more elaborate form of a Platonic view of rhetoric is Lauri Thurén's book *Derhetorizing Paul*. Thurén sees rhetoric as the contingent expression of coherent content. He seeks to steer a course between two outlooks: 1) The dogmatic interpretation that views the theology in Paul's letters as timeless and universal, and 2) The 'contextual' alternative that depicts Paul not so much as a systematic theologian but, rather, as a pragmatic writer who wrote each

of his letters for a specific purpose and a specific audience. Thurén admits that Paul “wrote his texts in complex, many-sided tensions of starting-points and goals.” He is adamant, however, that the apostle had an indisputably “organized, coherent theological system of thoughts, which is partly reflected in his texts” (Thurén 2000:13, 17). His book aims to clarify the theology “behind” or “beyond” the texts and the actual expressions, and to uncover the system of religious thoughts “beneath the surface level” (Thurén 2000:17, 26, 28, 93, 181). This approach requires a “derhetorized” text. To achieve that, Thurén tries “to identify the persuasive devices in the text and to filter out their effect on the ideas expressed” (Thurén 2000:28). His starting point is what he terms a “dynamic view” of Paul’s text. In this view, the author does not use the text solely to *inform* the readers about his opinions. Instead, his goal is to *affect* them and to influence their thoughts and actions. We must take into account the fact that in Paul’s letters, “strategic goals and tactical moves confuse and exaggerate the thoughts presented, as compared with neutral description” (Thurén 2000:25). It is doubtful, therefore, whether we can take his expressions at face value. If Paul’s ideas appear to the reader to be different, sometimes even within the same letter, we have to assume that he expressed himself in a one-sided and exaggerated manner and operated “with radical images instead of well-balanced, neutral descriptions of reality, though for the sake of rhetoric” (Thurén 2000:88).

Throughout Thurén’s book, the reader receives the impression that ‘theology’ refers to the coherent system of religious thoughts behind the actual expressions and that ‘rhetoric’ is mainly a matter of communicating these thoughts in a one-sided and exaggerated manner for the sake of affecting the addressees in their specific situation. Thurén makes little — if any — mention of the rhetorical character of the ‘coherent’ system of thoughts. He looks behind Paul’s words, not only for his belief system but apparently also for the truth. He is eager to deny that Paul is “a sophist without any firm stance,” “an opportunist” or “a situational thinker” (Thurén 2000:20, 38). Paul may — like other theologians or adherents of any particular ideology — simplify his concepts, but Thurén is adamant that this does not involve “compromising the truth” (Thurén 2000:182). This ‘truth’ can be found beyond the texts and the actual expressions.

I agree entirely with J. David Hester (2004:175), who in his review of Thurén’s book, states that his description of ‘derhetorization’ suggests “a near Platonic view of rhetoric.” Thurén embraces “what Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca describe as the philosophical pair ‘appearance/reality,’ where ‘rhetoric’ is the ‘apparent’ performance of a ‘real’ truth.” According to Hester (2004:175), this description of ‘derhetorization’ suggests “that rhetoric is something that is tenuous, contextual, an afterthought that strategizes upon an already present theological truth. ‘Rhetoric’ is contingent, theology fundamental.”

All interpreters who take the Platonic view of rhetoric as a starting point for their interpretation of Paul's argumentation are convinced that the apostle is not a sophist, an opportunist or an orator who tries "to make the weaker argument the stronger."

3.2.2 A (Neo-)Sophistic perspective

Those with a (neo-)sophistic view of Paul's rhetoric are very reluctant to make a distinction between the *res*, the content or the true core of his theology, and the *verba*, the rhetorical means the apostle uses to reach his goal. In this perception, Paul is an expert very skilled in the art of "making the weaker argument the stronger." Depending on his goal, he creates realities and constructs symbolic worlds. Basically, his theological arguments are means that serve a higher aim. I will present a model here which combines a constructionist view of Paul's theology with a 'rhetoric of power' which raises the question: What systems of power are at work in systems of thought? (Cf. Hester Amador 1999:*passim*).

Paul introduces himself in the Letter to the Galatians as an apostle sent through Jesus Christ and God the Father. The aim of his mission was to proclaim to the Gentiles that Jesus is the Son of God. From his other letters we know that Paul perceived Jesus Christ, the heavenly Son of God, as God's viceroy, who was assigned to destroy his enemies and to establish the universal kingdom of God, "so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). It was Paul's mission as an apostle of Jesus Christ to win "obedience from the Gentiles" (Romans 15:18; 1:5). We can say that the driving force behind Paul's theology is the expansion of power, the elementary imperialistic drive that determines most of world history. He is an apostle of a national Deity, the God of Israel, who has the ambition of conquering the world.

Paul's rhetoric is the most powerful weapon of his warfare (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). The apostle uses every argument that serves this goal. With this goal in mind, he creates a new symbolic universe with its characteristic power structure, building on existing symbolic worlds.

From this perspective in the Letter to the Galatians the whole world is divided into two parts. Whereas the kingdom of God is characterised by spirit, power, truth, sonship, knowledge, freedom, righteousness, life and blessing, the present evil age is typified by flesh, weakness, perversion of the truth, slavery, folly, sin, death and curse. Whatever fits Paul's purpose is assigned to the first category, whatever does not fit this purpose is relegated to the latter category. These categories were common in Paul's world, but the apostle applies them in a manner that serves his aim. They do not describe existing realities but are tools for shaping and moulding reality. They are means of persuasion used by Paul to convince his readers of his point of view.

From the same perspective Paul pictures the reality of both Jews and Gentiles as an existence under sin and curse (2:15-17; 3:13-14, 22). His concept of the sinfulness of Jews and Gentiles is a construction that fits into the power structure of his symbolic universe; declaring them all guilty is part of the rhetorical strategy that aims at their subjection. As Nietzsche (2002:197 [§ 26]) saw very clearly, the message of sin and atonement is a powerful instrument in the hands of priests to make people subjected to them. Threatening people with the curse of God is a very effective means in the rhetoric of power.

Paul's message is that Jews and Gentiles can be redeemed only by Christ. In his letters, the apostle uses a variety of soteriological symbols. He presents these symbols as a matter of course, whereas a reader who wants to understand the logic of it will face a great many problems. It seems as if for Paul every symbol is welcome insofar as it helps to convince his readers of the fact that belief in Christ is the only way to salvation. In the Letter to the Galatians, he gives the work of Christ a new meaning: Christ became a curse for us, in order that in him the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles (3:13). God sent his Son to redeem those who were under the law (4:4-5). No one before Paul ever attributed such a soteriological meaning to the work of Christ, let alone that Jesus himself would have understood his mission in this way, but Paul creates a new soteriological reality to win "obedience from the Gentiles." Crucial for him is that they no longer live their own lives, but that Christ lives in them with the effect that their lives are dedicated to God (2:19-20).

Since salvation is possible only through Christ, Paul has to deny any salvific power to all rival instances, primarily the Jewish law. As forgiveness of sin, justice and life come solely through the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul depicts the law as the origin of sin and death. In his letters to the Galatians, the Philippians, the Corinthians and the Romans he constructs a variety of models to that end. Apart from the fact that the model he develops in the Letter to the Galatians is difficult to understand, it is at various points at odds with the models of the other letters (Cf. Räisänen 1983: *passim*; Vos 2002a:306-309). The aim of all these constructions, however, is the same: to convince his readers that salvation is possible only through Christ. It seems as though the apostle has a bag of arguments and chooses whatever he needs to that end. In all these cases, he is creating theological realities as rhetorical means with the aim of subjecting his readers to the power of God and Christ.

The other side of Paul's theology of the law in the Letter to the Galatians is his conviction that Jews and Gentiles are justified solely through faith in Christ. In Lutheran exegesis, Paul's gospel of the justification through faith is often seen as the centre of his theology, thus belonging outside the realm of rhetoric. According to Hans Hübner (1992:168-69), who enters at length into the relationship of 'theology' and 'rhetoric' in the letters of Paul, the *iustificatio impii* is

Paul's theological essential and, as such, this 'fundamental conviction' is not a part of Paul's rhetoric. This point of view is, however, not shared by everyone. According to Krister Stendahl, for example,

[T]he doctrine of justification by faith was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promise of God to Israel (Stendahl 1977:2).¹⁵

If one accepts this view, the doctrine of the justification by faith alone is a rhetorical means to a higher end, to make the Gentiles obedient to the God of Israel.

It is possible to give other elements of Paul's theology a place in this structure of power. As an illustration of the combination of a neo-sophistic or constructionist view of Paul's theology with a 'rhetoric of power,' however, this sketch may suffice. In this view, there is no fundamental distinction between the 'coherent' and the 'contingent' elements, because the so-called 'coherent' elements or 'essentials' themselves belong to the contingent theological construction. They were not found as eternal truths, but created in the specific circumstances with which Paul had to cope. In this view, rhetoric lies at the very heart of Paul's theology as a whole.

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15 Cf. also W. Wrede (1904 [repr. 1964]:69).

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