The Rhetoric of Romans

Paul's letter to the Romans is often examined with an interest in how the apostle chooses to make his points. Paul evinces a breadth of knowledge and employs a variety of persuasive strategies, some of which appear to be devised from his background in Judaism and others from his cosmopolitan experience of the Greco-Roman world.

Biblical Citation

Paul draws heavily on the scriptures throughout the letter, quoting Bible passages to back up the points that he wants to make. In certain instances he uses what are called “testimony lists,” presenting his readers with a whole string of verses that speak to the matter at hand. For example, the testimony list in 3:10–18 quotes the following passages in rapid succession: Psalm 14:1–3; Psalm 53:1–2; Psalm 5:9; Psalm 140:3; Psalm 10:7; Isaiah 59:7–8; Psalm 36:1. Two more testimony lists in Romans occur in 9:25–29; 15:9–12. Some scholars think that testimony lists on various topics were developed for liturgical use in the early church and that Paul is drawing upon lists that he or someone else had developed previously.

Biblical Interpretation

Paul employs techniques of biblical interpretation associated with Jewish rabbis, taking well-known stories from the scriptures and explaining their contemporary meaning in creative ways. In chapter 4, he recalls the story of Abraham, whose faith was “reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:3). The significant point is that God did not regard Abraham as righteous because Abraham kept the Jewish law. That law had not even been given yet. Rather, God regarded Abraham as righteous because he trusted in God’s promise. Furthermore, Paul points out that this was before Abraham was circumcised, which means that he was essentially still a Gentile (4:9–12). Thus, Abraham, the great ancestor of the Jewish people, becomes an ironic example of how Gentiles (and Jews) are put right with God through faith. Later, in chapter 5, Paul pushes the frame of reference back beyond Abraham to Adam, the ancestor of all humanity. Both Jews and Gentiles are descended from Adam, and both inherit the consequences of his sin. But Jesus Christ comes as a new Adam, and his act of righteousness changes those consequences. Paul sets up an analogy: one man’s transgression meant condemnation for all, and now one man’s righteousness can mean justification for all (5:18).

Stoic Philosophy

In his letter to the Romans, Paul seems to draw upon some key concepts from Stoic philosophy, which might have been part of the conceptual background for his Gentile readers. This is seen most clearly in the first part of the letter, where Paul contends that God’s invisible nature is discernible through reflection on the natural world (1:20). The idea that certain patterns of behavior are “unnatural” (1:26) also invokes the Stoic tradition of grounding ethics in “natural law,” and Paul’s appeal to “conscience” in 2:15 employs a word that never occurs in the Old Testament but figures mightily in Stoic thought (see also 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:29; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11).
Diatribe

At several points in this letter, Paul employs a rhetorical style of argument known as “diatribe.” In essence, this consists of dialogue with an imaginary partner. In addition to posing questions for his readers to consider (2:3–4; 21–23; 7:1; 8:31–35; 9:19–21; 30; 10:14–15; 11:34–35), Paul responds to questions that he anticipates they might want to ask him. For example, he asks, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” (3:1). And later he begins a new discussion by asking, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (6:1). In such cases, Paul appears to be anticipating objections that could come up in response to his letter (see also 3:3, 5, 8; 6:15; 7:7, 13; 11:1, 11). He then demonstrates that he is a step ahead of potentially argumentative readers: he has already thought about the points that they will raise and is able to address their concerns.

Analogies from Daily Life

Paul tries to explain some of his theological points by drawing comparisons to social institutions and other phenomena with which his readers would be familiar. He invokes the institution of slavery to liken the new life Christians experience to a transfer of ownership: those who were once “slaves of sin” are now “slaves of righteousness” (6:16–19) or even “slaves of God” (6:22). In a different vein, he uses adoption to indicate that those who were once slaves are now full-fledged children of God and, indeed, heirs (8:14–17; cf. Gal. 4:5–7). He also uses widowhood to illustrate how someone’s death can set one free from the law: just as a woman is freed from marital laws when her husband dies, so Christians are freed from the covenant laws of Israel by the death of Christ (7:1–6). Finally, in a particularly memorable illustration, Paul uses the agricultural practice of grafting to explain the inclusion of Gentiles among the people of God: the Gentiles are like branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the rich root of a cultivated olive tree (11:17–24).

Bibliography

