

JAMES THOMPSON, *Apostle of Persuasion: Theology and Rhetoric in the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). Pp. ix + 320. Hardcover. US\$36.99.

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*Apostle of Persuasion* presents a well-argued contribution to Pauline scholarship from a mature, seasoned scholar. It consists of a substantial introduction, eleven key chapters and a brief conclusion. It includes an extensive bibliography, a Scripture and Ancient Sources Index, an author index, and a short, but helpful, subject index.

Thompson suggests a metaphor of a multilayered drawing well describes the multiple dimensions of Paul's thought. Two of these layers, theology and rhetoric, are the focus of this book. According to Thompson, three major obstacles confront the interpreter of Pauline theology. First, his letters are responses to questions raised in his community over a period of time. This limits interpreters' capacities for distilling the essential thought of the apostle. Second, apparent inconsistencies in Paul's treatment of some traditional topics impact interpretation. Third, determining which letters are actually written by Paul. While issues of style and setting play a role in assessing Pauline authorship, finding coherence between the theology of the disputed letters and the seven undisputed letters raises the question of what Pauline theology actuality is (3–4).

Regarding Paul's rhetoric, definite parallels to both Jewish and Greco-Roman rhetorical and epistolary conventions exist. However, Paul is not consistent in the way he employs and applies these conventions. Consequently, Paul's "letters include discourse that is unprecedented in the Jewish and Greek traditions ... Although his letters—especially in the outer frame—follow the pattern of ancient letter writing, the sustained arguments in his letters have few parallels" (2). In fact, the diversity and authority with which Paul writes his letters, leads Thompson to conclude that Paul presents a "new rhetoric."

Thompson suggests that, "for ancient orators, all strategies of persuasion were determined by the orator's goal of gaining *the appropriate results from the listeners: the acceptance of the argument*" (10, emphasis added). Paul consistently does this by announcing "the aims that govern his persuasion" (10). These aims or the "telos" of Paul's letters, aligns with God's telos. Consequently, Paul's letters "are not theological essays but his means of persuading the readers to reach that goal" (10). This telos has two key foci: first, that his recipients understand that they are part of a grand narrative located in Israel's salvation-history; and second, a pastoral aim that emphasises the moral transformation of his communities. These two foci determine Paul's "persuasive task, and [his] theology and rhetoric are instruments for reaching [these goals]" (16).

Chapters 1–4 outline Thomson's understanding of Paul's argumentation and theology. Chapter 1 considers different aspects of Paul's letters in relation to other ancient sources and notes the uniqueness of Paul's letter writing. Thompson discusses Aristotle's three *species* of speeches, and the five *categories* of

ancient rhetoric—invention (argumentation), arrangement, style, memory and delivery—as useful frameworks to consider Paul’s rhetoric. However, because Paul’s writings include both Greco-Roman *and* Hebrew features, any attempt to identify or place Paul’s letter within a specific rhetorical framework is difficult. Nevertheless, Thompson employs these categories at different points throughout his engagement with Paul’s letters.

Chapter 2 discusses Paul’s reflection of his past and the Jewish substructure of his theology. Chapter 3 compares and contrasts Paul and Jesus. Chapter 4 discusses Paul’s ethos and theology, setting the tone of the rest of the book. Paul’s autobiographical accounts, and his continual use of his own situation and story act as affective and effective persuasive techniques to establish the truthfulness and authority of his gospel. Chapters 5–11 explore how persuasion and rhetoric are applied in Paul’s letters based on contextual contingencies. Thompson concludes that “theology plays a vital role in Paul’s persuasive task” (269), but his “theology serves a rhetorical purpose” (270). As such “to interpret Paul is to acknowledge both the theological and the rhetorical layers of his communication, which exist in a dialectical relationship to each other” (271). According to Thompson, all of this is in order for Paul to seek the “transformation of his churches into the image of Christ” (272).

Overall, Thompson provides a careful and, on the whole, considered critical analysis of Paul’s thought. His application of persuasion and rhetoric based on what he considers the two aims of Paul is consistently applied throughout the book. I have two concerns. Firstly, although he argues that Paul doesn’t align consistently with ancient rhetorical conventions, Thompson attempts to apply these conventions in a rather inconsistent manner to identify Paul’s rhetoric and theology in his letters—even when Paul’s narrative and argumentation doesn’t fit these conventions. Secondly, while Thompson notes that the Spirit is important to Paul’s thought, he engages little this important theme, even in his chapter on Galatians where the Spirit is central to Paul’s theology and argumentation. Not everyone who studies Paul’s letters will agree with Thompson’s conclusions. Nevertheless, *Apostle of Persuasion* covers a lot of ground for such a short work, and Thompson’s discussion is well supported by both ancient and contemporary scholarship. Furthermore, the way he explores some concepts in depth, the layout, general clarity and consistency of Thompson’s argument, and the use of transliteration for Greek terms, makes this book very accessible and readable. It will remain an important conversation partner into the future for anyone studying Paul—students, academics, ministers and a general readership.

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