



Following the Argument of Romans

ROBERT JEWETT

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois

While I was working on this article in May of 1986, I happened by the bulletin board of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Evanston. It announced Professor Emeritus Joseph Sittler as the guest preacher. A flood of memories arose concerning classes with him in Chicago and on one memorable occasion, a trip together to an ecumenical meeting. It was the spring of 1957, if my memory serves me well, and Sittler was to preach on Romans. To my amazement, he embarked on a summary of the argument of the entire letter. It was a tour de force that started with Romans 1:16 and got as far as 5:21 when he ran out of time. As I reflect on that engrossing experience in light of subsequent years of study of Romans, I am struck by how very Protestant, indeed quintessentially Lutheran, that sermon was. Following the leading commentaries, this masterful exposition bypassed the introduction in the first 15 verses of Romans, and hence the situational purpose of Paul's writing, perceiving the climax of the argument in doctrinal statements in chapters 3 and 5. Both the fascination and the dilemma of this approach are captured by J. Christiaan Beker: "The presupposition that Romans is a 'theological confession' or a 'dogmatics in outline' is the real reason for the immense interest in the letter's architectonic structure and the neglect of its 'frame.'"¹ These words describe the challenge we face in studying the argumentative structure of Romans.

Since I share Beker's conviction that Romans is a situational letter rather than a doctrinal treatise, and since previous analyses of the letter have so largely reflected the theological preferences of scholars, it seems apparent that we need an impartial method of following Paul's argument. The rhetorical method is our most promising resource. It allows us to grasp the structure of the argument within the context of the peculiar purpose of the letter so that the rhetoric can be understood on its own terms, rather than from the perspective of modern

¹J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 62.

theological systems. I took a preliminary step toward developing this method in "Romans as an Ambassadorial Letter,"² an effort to discover the rhetorical genre of this highly abstract letter. Romans conforms to demonstrative rhetoric whose aim is to strengthen the ethos of an audience in a particular direction. As evident in the introduction and conclusion of the letter, Paul aims to provide a theological argument that will unify the competing house churches in Rome so that they will cooperate in the Spanish mission. Conflicts between the "weak" and "strong" (Rom 14:1-15:7), involving tensions between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians, conservatives and liberals, jeopardize this mission.³ The cautious manner in which Paul refers to his intended

visit (1:9-15) and to the help he needs from the Roman churches (15:22-29) is consistently ambassadorial, aimed at appealing to various sides in Rome. The thesis of Romans concerning the gospel as the “power of God” to achieve the purpose of divine righteousness (1:16-17) is integrally related to the scheme of world mission (15:8-13), which Paul now hopes to extend to the traditional end of the world, Spain.

I. ROMANS AND RHETORIC

The argument of Romans reflects the principles promoted by the rhetorical handbooks of antiquity. Aristotle refers to four parts of a typical discourse as containing an introduction, a statement or narrative of the issue, the proof, and an epilogue.⁴ Cicero advises the rhetor to organize his discourse in six sections, an *exordium* or introduction, a *narratio* or narration of the case, a *partitio* or statement of the thesis, a *confirmatio* or proof of the thesis, a *reprehensio* or rebuttal of opposing views, and finally a *conclusio* or conclusion.⁵ The Latin rhetorician Quintilius refers to similar categories whose nomenclature is quite useful in understanding Romans. The letter begins with an *exordium*, an introduction (1:1-12) which is followed by a brief *narratio*, a narration of the background of Paul’s intended visit to Rome (1: 13-15). Quintilius then refers to the main portion of the discourse, the *probatio* or proof of the case being argued (1:18-15:13). The next section according to Quintilius is the *refutatio*, the rebuttal of opposing views. However, since Romans is not a forensic letter, where a rebuttal of charges would be required, this section is missing. Finally, there is a *peroratio*, the conclusion of the letter that provides the practical appeal (15:14-16:27). Several Latin rhetoricians added a *propositio* or *partitio*, a brief statement of the thesis or enumeration of the issues placed between the narration and the proof, a detail that is matched in Romans 1:16-17. Paul’s letter therefore has a fivefold outline that would have been easily followed by the Roman audience conditioned to understand classical rhetoric.

²Robert Jewett, “Romans as an Ambassadorial Letter,” *Interpretation* 36 (1982) 9-20.

³Cf. Robert Jewett, *Christian Tolerance: Paul’s Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 23-36.

⁴Cf. the chart in Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft* (2nd ed.; Munich: Max Hueber, 1973) 148-49. Aristotle’s scheme is found in *Ars rhetorica* 3.13.4.

⁵Cicero, *De inventione* 1.19. In *De partitione oratoria* 27, Cicero consolidates the *reprehensio* and *confirmatio*, drops the category of *partitio*, and calls the conclusion *peroratio*.

George A. Kennedy has attempted to apply these rhetorical categories to the organization of New Testament material.⁶ He follows the suggestion of Wilhelm Wuellner⁷ and myself in viewing Romans as a demonstrative letter but organizes it somewhat differently than suggested above. Here is an outline reconstructed from his discussion:

1:1-15	I.	(Address) and Proem
1:16-17	II.	Proposition
1:18-11:36	III.	Headings: Doctrinal Message and Refutation of Objections

1:1-15	I.	(Address) and Proem
1:18-2:16	A.	Narration on the Power of God for Damnation
2:17-4:25	B.	The Situation of the Jew
5:1-6:23	C.	The Situation of the Gentile
7:1-25	D.	Address to Jews on the Nature of Faith
8:1-39	E.	(Life in Spirit) without Separation from Christ
9:1-11:36	F.	Address to Gentiles on the Situation of the Jews
12:1-15:13	IV.	Pastoral Headings: Application of the Doctrine Developed in the Doctrinal Headings
15:14-33	V.	Epilogue
16:1-23	VI.	Postscript and Letter Closure

Several points in Kennedy's analysis deserve discussion. He sees a kind of narration in the beginning of Paul's theological argument (1:18-2:16), but both the content and location of Romans 1:13-15 serve this purpose more precisely. Here Paul provides the background of his intended visit, placing it in the context of his previous missionary activities. Consequently, I would argue that the introduction proper, identified by Kennedy with a Greek rhetorical term, the proem, is completed by 1:10-12, the statement of the *causa* of the letter, i.e., the main purpose of writing—to prepare the way for Paul's intended visit. I am closer to agreement with Kennedy, however, in identifying 1:16-17 as the "proposition" of the letter that acts as a "partition underlying the structure of 1:18-11:36."⁸ As commentators have long observed, these verses contain the thesis of the letter as a whole. I would contend, however, that the formal argument of the letter reaches beyond 11:36 to chapters 12-15 as well. In contrast to previous commentators, I would favor a more integral connection of these final chapters to the theological thesis in 1:16-17, and I would like to avoid non-rhetorical categories like "pastoral headings" or the terms frequently employed in commentaries on Romans such as "ethical teaching"⁹ or "exhortation."¹⁰ Another weakness of the Kennedy analysis is that the term "headings" employed to describe the theological argument of the letter does not convey a

⁶George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984) 152-56.

⁷Wilhelm Wuellner, "Paul's Rhetoric of Argumentation in Romans: An Alternative to the Donfried-Karris Debate Over Romans," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976) 330-51. Wuellner provides a rhetorical analysis of Romans as consisting of *exordium* (1:1-15), *propositio* (1:16-17), *confirmatio* (1:18-15:13) and *peroratio* (15:14-16:23).

⁸G. Kennedy, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 153.

⁹John Knox, *Romans, Interpreter's Bible*, ed. G. Buttrick (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1954) 9:578.

¹⁰Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 6; Neukirchen: Neukirchener; Zurich: Benzinger, 1978-82) 3.1.

sense of logical development that moves from the thesis right through to 15:13. The final question is whether the material in chapter 16 should be viewed as a “postscript.” Kennedy observes how important these details are in “establishing a personal tie with those [Paul] addresses: these are, as it were, his witnesses,”¹¹ which would seem to bring this material in line with the category I prefer, “peroration,” in which the emotional ties between writer and audience are adduced in the appeal for a particular set of values or actions. Despite these minor differences, I feel that the work of Kennedy represents a step in the right direction in using rhetorical categories to understand the argument of Romans.¹² The challenge is to build on this foundation to provide a more coherent grasp of the argument as a whole. Additional resources in classical rhetoric and the insights of generations of commentators on Romans can be employed to take this next step.

II. RHETORICAL PROOFS

I believe that the remarkable coherence of Paul’s argument would be more easily grasped by using the logical categories taught by ancient rhetoricians. The terms “confirmation,” “amplification,” “ratiocination,” and “comparison” were developed in classical rhetoric to describe typical phases in the organization of proofs. The application of these categories would help to clarify the relation between 1:18-4:25 and the subsequent sections of the letter, a subject that has been intensively debated by commentators. The main argument is stated in the first four chapters; yet themes and questions touched on in that discussion are taken up in subsequent arguments in the letter. I would contend that these later sections are all part of the proof of the letter, amplifying the basic thesis that has been developed in what I would identify as the *confirmatio* section of 1:18-4:25. The confirmation of the thesis concerning the righteousness of God begins with the sin of Jews and Greeks alike, moves on to proclaim the gift of righteousness through faith in Christ, and climaxes with the description of Abraham as the parent of all who are set right by faith. One might visualize the structure of the argument as a thesis in 1:16-17 followed by a circle of proof in 1:18-4:25 that clinches the case. The next three proofs in Romans serve to amplify this basic case, answering relevant theological and ethical questions or objections.

As a form of amplification, ratiocination deals with the logical implications of an already proven case, often proceeding with a series of arguments dealing with the consequences of the intended circumstance, according to Heinrich Lausberg.¹³ This style of argument was particularly typical for discourse in the demonstrative genre.¹⁴ The application of the category of ratiocination for 5:1-8:39 and 12:1-15:13 helps to clarify the logical connections with the confirmation section of 1:18-4:25. Chapters 5-8 deal with a series of objections raised

¹¹G. Kennedy, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 152.

¹²For a parallel effort, see also Folkert Siegert, *Argumentation bei Paulus gezeigt an Römer 9-11* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985) 112-19.

¹³H. Lausberg, *Handbuch*, 223. The argumentative form of ratiocinatio is discussed in Quin. tillian 8.4.15.

¹⁴Ibid.

against the doctrine of righteousness through faith. The effect of Nils Dahl’s appraisal of the

pivotal role of 5:1-11 can be taken into account in this analysis.¹⁵ This section summarizes and begins the amplification of major themes of the preceding proof, thereby introducing the themes of what I identify as the first *rationatio* section. The second *rationatio* proof, 12:1-15:13, sets forth the ethical implications of the argument, providing guidelines for living out the righteousness of God. Since none of the ancient rhetoricians used the term *exhortatio* as part of a speech or a letter, I prefer to avoid its use here. Chapters 12-15 are not incidental additions to the letter but an integral part of Paul's argument concerning the righteousness of God manifest in the gospel. This resolves one of the major problems in the interpretation of Romans, namely, the relation between theology and ethics, providing a full integration.

The form of proof called *comparatio* uses an historical example or an imaginative case to demonstrate the superiority of the argument or case already established. It is also a favored argumentative form in demonstrative rhetoric, says Lausberg.¹⁶ I believe that this category fits the peculiar content of Romans 9-11 very nicely. Here Paul takes up the problem of Israel's unbelief, examining whether it disproves the thesis concerning the triumph of divine righteousness through the gospel. Far from being a somewhat irrelevant appendix or a "separate treatise,"¹⁷ Romans 9-11 is fully integrated as an essential argument in Paul's extended proof of God's righteousness, showing that he does not have to be "ashamed of the gospel" (1:16).

III. SKETCHING THE ARGUMENT

I would now like to sketch the argument of Romans, using these rhetorical categories.

Part One: Exordium (Introduction, 1:1-12). Here Paul introduces himself to the divided Roman audience, stressing his apostolic authority, defining his gospel in a preliminary way, and thanking God for their faith. He concludes with the main purpose of his letter, his forthcoming visit to Rome for the sake of the world mission.

Part Two: Narratio (Narration, 1:13-15). Paul describes the background of his missionary project to come to Rome, which has thus far been frustrated.

Part Three: Partitio (Partition, Thesis Statement, 1:16-17). Paul states the major contention of the letter concerning the gospel as the powerful embodiment of the righteousness of God.

Part Four: Probatio (Proof, 1:18-15:13). Paul proves that the righteousness of God, rightly understood, has transforming and unifying implications for the Roman house churches and their participation in world mission. There are four

¹⁵Nils A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 82-91.

¹⁶H. Lausberg, *Handbuch*, 222-23. *Comparatio* is discussed in Quintillian 8.4.9.

¹⁷William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Scribner's, 1895) 225-26. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932) 148.

elaborate proofs in Romans: an extensive confirmation of the thesis followed by three wide-ranging amplifications. Though couched in the generalities typical for demonstrative discourse, each proof had an important bearing on the situation in the Roman house churches and the issue of the mission to Spain.

Section A: *Confirmatio* (Confirmation, 1:18-4:25). Paul proves the basic thesis of 1:16-17 by showing that the impartial righteousness of God provides righteousness for Jews and gentiles alike, by faith. This argument contains five major sections: (1) human idolatry and divine wrath (1:18-32); (2) impartial judgment according to deeds (2:1-29); (3) Jewish involvement in universal sin (3:1-20); (4) “rightwising” by faith and the oneness of God (3:21-31); and (5) Abraham as the example of faith (4:1-25).

Section B. *Amplificatio* in the form of *Ratiocinatio* (Amplification in the form of ratiocination, 5:1-8:39). Paul deals with a series of implications and objections to the doctrine of the righteousness of God conveyed by Christ. This amplification consists of ten sections: (1) introduction (5:1-11) where the theme of righteousness as peace in the midst of afflictions is stated; (2) the contrasting realms of Adam and Christ (5:12-21); (3) the answer to an objection on the basis of baptism (6:1-14); (4) the answer to an objection on the basis of an exchange of lordship (6:15-23); (5) life in Christ as freedom from law (7:1-6); (6) the answer to an objection with a doctrine of law perverted by covetousness (7:7-12); (7) the answer to an objection with a doctrine of sin, death, and the law (7:13-25); (8) the cosmic struggle between flesh and Spirit (8:1-17); (9) the hopeful suffering of the children of God (8:18-30); and (10) conclusion: no separation from the love of Christ (8:31-39).

C. *Amplificatio* in the Form of *Comparatio* (Amplification in the form of comparison, 9:1-11:36). Paul proves by means of the example of unbelieving Israel that the righteousness of God will still be triumphant, that the gospel in the end will not fail. This necessary amplification of the argument is developed with ten sections that match the structure of the preceding proof in Section B, with a formal introduction and conclusion as follows: (1) introduction: the tragic riddle of Israel’s unbelief (9:1-5); (2) Israel and the righteousness of divine election (9:6-18); (3) the answer to an objection by scriptural proofs (9:19-29); (4) the answer to a question about righteousness by a doctrine of unenlightened zeal (9:30-10:4); (5) righteousness by faith as confirmed in Scripture (10:5-13); (6) the gospel freely preached but rejected (10:14-21); (7) the answer about whether God has rejected Israel (11:1-10); (8) the answer about the hidden purpose of Israel’s rejection (11:11-24); (9) the mystery of Israel’s salvation (11:25-32); and (10) conclusion: a doxology concerning the mysterious mind of God (11:33-36).

D. *Amplificatio* in the form of *Ratiocinatio* (Amplification in the form of ratiocination, 12:1-15:13). Paul lays out ethical guidelines for living in righteousness, thus developing the final proof of the thesis in 1:17 that the righteous shall *live* by faith. Like the preceding two major proofs, this argument is constructed of ten sections with a formal introduction and conclusion. The argument develops as follows: (1) introduction: the thesis concerning the motivation and assessment of praiseworthy behavior (12:1-2); (2) sober self-assessment and the exercise of charismatic gifts (12:3-8); (3) guidelines for genuine love (12:9-21); (4) proper subjection to the government (13:1-7); (5) the rela-

tion of love to law (13:8-10); (6) moral alertness in the last days (13:11-14); (7) guidelines for the weak and the strong (14:1-12); (8) guidelines for mutual upbuilding in pluralistic congregations (14:13-23); (9) exhortation to follow Christ’s example in edifying the weak (15:1-6); and (10) the conclusion regarding the motivational horizon of world mission and unification (15:7-13).

Part Five: Peroratio (Peroration, or conclusion, 15:14-16:27). This consists of an appeal

for the cooperation of the Roman house churches in missionary activities in Jerusalem, Rome, and Spain. With the elimination of two interpolations identified by a number of contemporary exegetes (the warning against heretics in 16: 17-20a and the concluding doxology in 16:25-27), this peroration is organized in five distinct sections: (A) The recapitulation of Paul's missionary calling and strategy (15:14-21); (B) An appeal to participate in Paul's present and future missionary plans (15:22-33); (C) A recommendation of Phoebe as the patron of the Spanish mission (16:1-2); (D) Greetings and commendations between potentially cooperating missionary leaders (16:3-16, 21-23); and (E) The epistolary benediction (16:20b).

The organization of the pericopes in this analysis follows for the most part the semantic discourse structure suggested by J. P. Louw.¹⁸ He provides a colon analysis of the Greek text and then organizes the cola into closely associated pericopes. I have altered his scheme by consolidating several pericopes into the five units in Section IV A, following the perceptions of a number of commentators about the major divisions in 1:18-4:25. I followed his analysis exactly in discerning the ten pericopes of Sections IV B and C. Since Louw does not use rhetorical categories to identify the large units of the argument, this scheme was not recognizable in his study. I have altered his outline at one point to produce the ten units of Section IV D: I divided the first unit into the thesis statement of 12:1-2 and the material in 12:3-8, following Käsemann, Harrisville, Dodd, Michel, Knox, Wilckens, and others at this point. I have also altered Louw's outline to produce the five pericopes in Section V, separating the recommendation of Phoebe in 16:1-2 from the greetings and commendations of 16:3-16, 21-23.¹⁹

There now appears to be a remarkable symmetry in Sections IV B, C, and D, each proof beginning with a formal introduction and ending with a formal, even liturgical conclusion. The correspondence between the five pericopes of IV A and V is also noteworthy. I plan to investigate the potential significance of the disposition of five pericopes for Sections IV A and V and of ten pericopes for Sections IV B, C and D. My preliminary impression is that this formal disposition places Romans firmly within the arena of the discussion of the Jewish Torah, since series of five or ten are not favored in Greco-Roman rhetoric.

IV. REFLECTIONS

Some preliminary, concluding reflections may now be in order. The argument of Romans not only shows rhetorical skill and forethought, but also the intent to find common ground between Jewish Christian and gentile Christian factions in

¹⁸J. P. Louw, *A Semantic Discourse Analysis of Romans* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1979).

¹⁹J. P. Louw, *Romans*, 2.141 provides support for this division of 16:1-16 into two pericopes.

the Roman house churches. Nowhere else in Paul's writing are the concerns of Jewish Christians taken up in so systematic and friendly a manner. The unparalleled density of citations from the Jewish Scriptures appears to be matched by the use of Hebrew rhetorical series of fives and tens in the structure of the argument. Yet Paul does not abandon his critique of the Torah as a means of salvation nor his commitment to a gospel that transcends cultural barriers. The goal of the entire argument, in fact, is to sustain the ethos favoring world unification through the gospel, as the climax of the theological and ethical argument in 15:7-13 reveals.

If one were to pose the traditional question of the "high point" or "climax" of Romans, it

is surely found in the peroration in chapters 15-16 rather than in the doctrinal themes of the earlier part of the letter. If the dynamics of ancient rhetoric are taken into account, the proofs of the earlier chapters of Romans are seen to have a practical purpose announced in the introduction and developed with powerful emotional appeals at the end of the discourse. This purpose was to elicit the cooperation of the Roman house churches in Paul's missionary activities, thus serving the ultimate purpose of divine righteousness in regaining control of a lost and disobedient world. The doctrines that we Christians have struggled for so long and so violently to define and defend were originally intended to advance a larger goal—the unification of God's world. Salvation is inextricably joined here with world transformation, theology with ethics. If Paul's grandiose argument were better understood, it might still provide a basis for achieving its original vision: to bring "all the peoples" (Rom 15:11) to praise the One whose gospel can still restore our eroded and fractured world to its intended righteousness.