

# Rhetorical Criticism: Analysis of Its Methods and Principles of Early Proponents in the New Testament Interpretation

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## Introduction

The beginning of rhetorical criticism, which constitutes part of new literary criticism, can be traced back to the writing of St. Augustine's (354 – 430 CE) *De Doctrina Christiana* (Book 4) where he employed rhetorical principles from Cicero's *De Inventione* and *Orator* to analyze the Bible.<sup>1</sup> However, the so called rhetorical criticism to biblical interpretation came to a limelight only in 1968 when James Muilenburg, in his presidential address to Society of Biblical Literature, challenged the gathering scholars to go "beyond form criticism" and use a rhetorical criticism to interpret biblical text.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, this research paper intends to study the role of rhetorical criticism in New Testament (NT) interpretation. The study limit its discussion to the core concepts and presupposition of rhetorical criticism, its methods and principles of the early select proponents in the NT study, and also give a critical evaluation of the same theory.

## 1. Rhetorical Criticism: Presupposition

As already hinted in the introduction, rhetorical criticism as an interpretive method in the study of NT comes to light as a result of the 'bankruptcy of' but not necessarily as a replacement to form critical approach. One of the limitations of form critical approach to biblical interpretation is that it fails to understand the impact the text has on the readers.<sup>3</sup> Rather than taking into account the 'wholeness' of the document (text), form criticism considers the small units or blocks of material in the text. That is to say, the text is given less importance in form criticism. There is also a tendency to emphasize the form and the life-setting (*sitz-im-leben*) over the structure and content.<sup>4</sup> Having realized the need to re-emphasize the importance of the text in biblical interpretation, Muilenburg says that "a responsible and proper articulation of the words in their linguistic patterns and in their precise formulations will reveal to us the texture and fabric of the writer's thought, not only what it is that he thinks, but as he thinks it."<sup>5</sup> Such a realization of the importance of the text which is absent in form critical approach may be taken as the reason for the beginning of rhetorical criticism. The following points include the important characteristics and presupposition of rhetorical criticism in NT interpretation.

1.1. Rhetorical criticism considers the articulation and primacy of the text over the historical setting. Therefore, greater emphasis is given to "the speaker or writer's perspective as a factor in determining the historical audience and problem."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero *Inv.* 2.4.12–59.178; *De Or.* 2.81.333–85.349 (cf. Aristotle *Rhet.* 1.3.15; *Rhet. ad Alex.* 1.1421b.7ff.); cited in Duane F. Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 166.

<sup>2</sup> James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969):1-18.

<sup>3</sup> Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," 4; cf. Richard R. Melick, Jr., "Literary Criticism of the New Testament," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation: A Complete Library Tools and Resources*, eds. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews & Robert B. Sloan (Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 439-40.

<sup>4</sup> David Greenwood, "Rhetorical Criticism and Formgeschichte: Some Methodological Considerations," *Society of Biblical Literature* 89/4 (December 1970): 418-19.

<sup>5</sup> Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," 7. According to Joan E. Cook, S.C., "With this new method, he [Muilenburg] aimed at finding a means to move from the text to "a raid on the ultimate;" hence, moving directly from the text to the 'ultimate.'" Joan E. Cook, "Beyond 'Form Criticism and Beyond': James Muilenburg's Influence on a Generation of Biblical Scholars," *EGL & NWBS* 17 (1997):20. A similar approach was proposed by Amos N. Wilder writing in a preface to *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel*, where he suggested for raiding the text by putting the reader in touch with the transcendent/ultimate. Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis L. Stamps, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation: The Entextualization of the Situation in the New Testament Epistles," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, JSNTSS 90 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 198.

1.2. However, rhetorical criticism does not completely abandon the context of the author and his/her audiences. This is true especially with the Greco-Roman rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> Like a historical-critical approach, the Greco-Roman rhetoric is concerned with “the situation of the authors of the NT texts and their audiences.”<sup>8</sup> It hopes to reveal that there is always an interaction between the text and the author, between the past and the present. Hence, it aims to discover the authorial intent and the way in which that intent is transmitted through a text to an audience.<sup>9</sup> As such, the aim of rhetorical criticism also includes analyzing the way in which the author arranged his/her material in order to make the best impact on his/her readers.

1.3. Rhetorical criticism sees the text as the final form of the text and as an indissoluble whole and creative unity.<sup>10</sup>

1.4. Furthermore, it assumes that the writings of NT are basically “formal” with the exclusion of informal writings such as that of friendly letters. For this reason, it believes that the writer is able to employ different kinds of persuasive techniques.<sup>11</sup>

1.5. Rhetorical criticism also follows a pluralistic attitude in that the reality of rhetoric is shaped differently by the demands of different peoples in different circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

1.6. An analysis of the NT text using a Greco-Roman rhetoric or the ancient rhetoric assumes that the writers of the NT have some knowledge about the rhetoric of their time, whether that familiarity comes from a formal or an informal education.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Rhetorical Criticism in NT Studies: Methods and Principles

This section underlines the methods and principles of early select proponents of rhetorical criticism in NT studies. The section can be divided into two sub-sections, namely, ancient or Greco-Roman rhetoric and New or Modern Rhetoric.

**2.1. Ancient or Greco-Roman Rhetoric:** Muilenburg and his school failed to come up with an identifiable model but only vaguely defining the term rhetorical criticism.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, other scholars advanced the stated criticism to a greater height. It was Hans Dieter Betz who renewed an interest in the rhetorical analysis of Pauline letters by reading Galatians against the background of “Greco-Roman rhetoric and epistolography.”<sup>15</sup> Betz identifies Galatians as an apologetic letter that is related to a judicial rhetoric which is common to court law. However, Betz’s proposal has been criticized for the possible absence of apologetic type of epistles in the first century period<sup>16</sup> and also for equating “rhetoric” with “epistolography.”<sup>17</sup> It is said that most ancient handbooks of rhetoric hardly deal with letters. George A. Kennedy was the first to challenge Betz’s classification of Galatians, arguing that Paul was preaching the gospel rather than defending himself against the charges directed against him. Therefore, he suggests a deliberative rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> Although there are suggestions

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<sup>7</sup> Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 169.

<sup>8</sup> Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 169.

<sup>9</sup> George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Cook, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” 20.

<sup>11</sup> Melick, “Literary Criticism,” 441.

<sup>12</sup> R. L. Scott, “A synoptic view of systems of Western rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975):439-47, as quoted by J. N. Vorster, “Why Opt for a Rhetorical Approach,” *Neotestamentica* 29/2 (1995):395.

<sup>13</sup> Informal education refers to a mere exposure to oral and written rhetorical practice that permeated Jewish and Hellenistic cultures. Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 169.

<sup>14</sup> Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” 1-18; Cf. Wilhem Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49/3 (1987):451. Stamps also states that Muilenburg only “vaguely defined what he meant.” Dennis L. Stamps, “Rhetorical Criticism and the Rhetoric of New Testament Criticism,” *Literature and Theology* 6/3 (September 1992):269.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, “The Literary Composition and Function of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” *New Testament Studies* 21/3 (1975):353; cf. idem, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> Duane F. Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament: Notes on History and Method,” in *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Notes on History and Method*, eds. Duane F. Watson and Alan J. Hauser (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 108.

<sup>17</sup> C. Joachim Classen, “St Paul’s Epistles and Ancient Graeco-Roman Rhetoric,” in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, JSNTSS 90 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 269.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 144–52; cf. Robert Hall, “The Rhetorical Outline for Galatians: A Reconsideration,” *JBL* 106 (1987):277–87.

about Galatians as “a mixed rebuke-request letter” that divides the letter into a “rebuke” (judicial rhetoric, 1:6–4:11) and a “request” (deliberative rhetoric, 4:12–6:10),<sup>19</sup> and as re-conceptualization in the light of the New Rhetoric,<sup>20</sup> the most valuable contribution comes from Kennedy.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Betz who fails to discuss about his methodology in detail, Kennedy lays down a proper methodology. Accordingly, the below section is committed to discussing its Kennedy’s methodology.

**2.1.1. Kennedy’s Greco-Roman Rhetorical Theory:** According to Kennedy, there are five main categories of ancient rhetorical theory as it was taught in Greco-Roman schools, namely: invention, arrangement, style, memory (preparation for delivery) and delivery (rules for control of the voice and the use of gestures). However, the last two theories, such as memory and delivery, are not included in constructing a rhetorical theory for NT interpretation as they relate mostly to oral presentation. The last two theories are also omitted from the classical rhetorical handbooks.<sup>22</sup> Based on classical rhetorical handbooks, Kennedy develops five interrelated stages for the interpretation of the NT:

- (i) To determine “the rhetorical unit” by identifying the *inclusio* (opening/proem), the middle, and the closure (epilogue) in the text.<sup>23</sup>
- (ii) To define “the rhetorical situation of the unit” by looking at the specific situation or condition which controls the rhetorical response.<sup>24</sup>
- (iii) To define “the primary rhetorical problem” to which the speech is addressed. This includes two frameworks, namely, a determination of the species of rhetoric<sup>25</sup> and an identification of the main question (stasis) at issue.<sup>26</sup> The species of rhetoric includes judicial (accusation and defense), deliberative (persuasion and dissuasion), and epideictic (praise and blame).
- (iv) To analyze the “rhetoric invention, arrangement and style.”<sup>27</sup> The “rhetoric invention” refers to the planning of discourse and the arguments to be used in it. It begins with identifying the basis of conflict and main question at issue, and then determines the species of rhetoric such as judicial, deliberative and epideictic.<sup>28</sup>

With regards to “rhetoric arrangement,” one must carefully observe the arrangement (taxis) of various units into an integrated discourse. This arrangement includes the ordering of the various components like the *exordium* (introduction), *narration* (statement of facts), *partitio* (proposition to be developed), *probatio* (arguments and development of topics in support of the proposition or main body), *refutatio* (refutation of the opposition), and *peroratio* (conclusion or summary of points).<sup>29</sup>

The final part of rhetoric, the “rhetoric style” can be divided into lexis (diction) and synthesis. Whereas the former deals with the choice or proper use of the words in any given context to produce greater and varying effects, the latter is concerned with analyzing the composition of words, or the way in which words are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences such as “figures of speech and figures of thought.”<sup>30</sup> Watson identifies such important figures of speech in the NT as “antithesis, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, paronomasia, personification, and repetition.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> G. Walter Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts*, JSNTSup 29 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 21–71.

<sup>20</sup> Philip H. Kern, *Rhetoric and Galatians: Assessing an Approach to Paul’s Epistle*, SNTSMS 101 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 120–66; cf. Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 16, 323–31.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 169; cf. C. Clifton Black, II, “Rhetorical Criticism and the New Testament,” *Proceedings* 8 (1988):77.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 34-35.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 169-70; cf. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 13-23.

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 36-37.

<sup>27</sup> Watson, “Notes on History and Method,” 110.

<sup>28</sup> Watson, “Notes on History and Method,” 110.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 25-27.

<sup>31</sup> Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 170.

- (v) To analyze the “overall evaluation of the rhetorical effectiveness of the unit” by looking at: (a) The appropriateness of the speech to its rhetorical question, *exigence*<sup>32</sup> and the problem (Does it provide clear, detailed answers to the audience’s questions or does it encourage them?) (b) The arrangement of the address in its subtlety of persuasion, (c) with respect to invention, including all the internal modes of persuasion in play (i.e., its *pathos* and *ethos*).<sup>33</sup>

Using these criteria, few examples can be given as to how the Greco-Roman rhetoric can be used for interpreting the NT text.

**2.1.2. Kennedy’s Greco-Roman Rhetoric in NT Interpretation:** When applied Greco-Roman or ancient rhetorical method to read the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7),<sup>34</sup> the Sermon as a whole is identified as a “deliberative rhetoric” because it is an advice given by Jesus on life conduct while looking to the immediate future.<sup>35</sup> Although some of the Sermon on the Mount appear to be epideictic in nature with the presence of praises and blames (e.g. Beatitudes), but their positioning at the beginning of the speech may suggest that the Beatitudes rather function as an introduction (*proem*) to the Sermon. Kennedy denies the sermon as judicial rhetoric because there is “no judgment of the past, either applied to the Jews as a whole or to individuals.”<sup>36</sup>

In analyzing John 13-17, Kennedy identifies epideictic rhetoric in which the time reference is usually present, while the future is only anticipated.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, one can identify the disciples’ attitudes and feelings towards Jesus’ departure from the world in these chapters.<sup>38</sup> The chapters deal with the disciples’ reaction to the situation they were being put.

Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees in Matthew 21:23–23:1-36 can be considered as a judicial rhetoric. Judicial rhetoric as an “accusation and defense” in legal whether the end may be justified or unjustified,<sup>39</sup> one identifies Jesus’ flat denial of the authority of the Pharisees in Matthew 23–23:1-36. He also identifies Paul’s letter to Second Corinthians, with the exception of chapters 8 and 9, as the other probable candidate for “judicial rhetoric.”<sup>40</sup>

**2.1.3. Limitations of Kennedy’s Greco-Roman Rhetoric:** In spite of the contributions Greco-Roman rhetoric made towards the interpretation of NT text as seen above, there are also limitations about this method of interpretation.

Firstly, Kennedy fails to make a clear distinction between the rhetorical situation and the historical situation in the process of deriving scriptural meaning. Instead, he seems to be equating the two situations.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “A situation under which an individual is called upon to make some response: the response made is conditioned by the situation and in turn has the possibility of affecting the situation or what follows from it.” Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 37-38.

<sup>34</sup> See his detail discussion on Sermon on the Mount in Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 39-44.

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 45; cf. Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 171.

<sup>36</sup> A deliberative orator who wants to attract the attention of an audience like Jesus did will have to begin with a formal *proem/exordium* (i.e., the Beatitudes in Mt. 5:3-16), followed by the *proposition* that the law and the prophets are fulfilled (5:17-20) and that the righteousness of the audience must exceed that of the Scribes and the Pharisees (5:18-20). Then continue with *the probatio* (an argument, a proposal or thesis in support of the proposition) of the speaker (5:21-7:20), and ends with the evidence to support his/her view (*peroratio* which is a kind of summary of points made, 7:21-27). Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 45-48; cf. Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 171.

<sup>37</sup> Duane F. Watson, “The Three Species of Rhetoric and the Study of the Pauline Epistles,” in *Paul and Rhetoric*, eds. J. Paul Sampley and Peter Lampe (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 25-26.

<sup>38</sup> Unlike form criticism which tries to see two separate versions here; rhetorical criticism, however, looks at the text in its entirety with a view to knowing how the audience might have perceived it. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 87.

<sup>40</sup> Betz argues that chapter 8 is both an advisory and deliberative rhetoric (vv. 1-15) and administrative and judicial (vv. 16-23), while chapter 9 purely forms a deliberative rhetoric to the Christian of Achaia, urging them to complete the collection and to perceive it in spiritual terms. Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul*, ed. George W. MacRae, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 129–40.

<sup>41</sup> E. M. Cornelius, “The Relevance of Ancient Rhetoric to Rhetorical Criticism,” *Neotestamentica* 28/2 (1994):464.

Secondly, the narrowness of Greco-Roman rhetoric in scope makes the theory applicable only to some portions of the gospels, and it does not seem to work for the study of the whole gospels as a single rhetorical unit.<sup>42</sup>

Thirdly, the Greco-Roman rhetoric seems to lack a philosophical support. Although the Greco-Roman rhetoric has a philosophical support from Aristotle's *Ars Rhetorica*; however, as Vernon K. Robbins has stated, it rather rendered its reputation on the use of "authoritative terms and precise analytical practices" than its philosophical soundness.<sup>43</sup>

Fourthly, Watson is skeptical about the extent to which the Greco-Roman rhetoric can have an influence upon the Jewish culture by the first century CE, and also about the rightful use of the method for analyzing Jewish texts.<sup>44</sup>

Fifthly, there is a tendency to combine "oracles or letters" into elaborate rhetorical schemes of organization, while the two may be treated differently in the ancient times.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the Greco-Roman rhetorical interpretation tends to limit its analysis and interpretation of biblical texts to "speech or argument"<sup>46</sup> and also to "a particular kind of time in relation to text – namely the time of reading."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is almost exclusively concerned with the textual constraints while reading.

**2.2. The New or Modern Rhetoric:** Owing to the above reasons that include narrowness in scope and limitation of the Greco-Roman rhetoric, and also its failure to address the philosophical aspects,<sup>48</sup> there developed a new reading called New Rhetoric<sup>49</sup> or modern rhetoric which is considered to be more developed and a better tool for interpreting the NT than the Greco-Roman rhetoric.<sup>50</sup> Like the Greco-Roman rhetoric, the New Rhetoric also takes into account the effect rhetoric has upon the audience. But unlike the previous one, the New Rhetoric relatively emphasizes on the larger social context of communication which includes both the speaker and the audience. As Watson states, the new rhetoric "is concerned with the effect of the communication upon the speaker and the audience."<sup>51</sup> The prominent proponents for the New Rhetoric include C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca.

**2.2.1. C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca and the New Rhetoric:** Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory is also known as a "theory of argumentation" which has its predecessor in the writing of W. Wuellner who identifies four features of theory and practice using modern rhetoric. These features include "(1) the turn toward argumentation ... (2) focus on the text's rhetorical intentionality or exigency; (3) the social, cultural, ideological values imbedded in the argument's premises ... and (4) the rhetorical or stylistic techniques ..."<sup>52</sup> Wuellner's theory was later redefined by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca based on a philosophical assessment of argumentation in the tradition of Aristotle's *Ars Rhetorica* and the Greco-Roman rhetoric. The theory is a synchronic approach to argumentation and persuasion rather than a mere style that aims at ornamentation or decoration.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the modern rhetoric is unlikely to concern with the historical aspect of the text in interpreting NT as much as Greco-Roman rhetoric does<sup>54</sup> although modern rhetoric does not completely negate the historical questions completely. As Watson states:

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<sup>42</sup> Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism," 171.

<sup>43</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, "Present and Future of Rhetorical Analysis," in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture: Essays from the 1995 London Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, JSNTSS 146 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism," 170.

<sup>45</sup> C. Clifton Black, II, "Keeping Up with Recent Studies. XVI. Rhetorical Criticism and Biblical Interpretation," *The Expository Times* 100 (1989):256-57; cf. Watson, "Notes on History and Method," 111.

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, "Rhetorical Analysis," 26.

<sup>47</sup> Wuellner, "Rhetorical Criticism," 178.

<sup>48</sup> Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism," 170. Wuellner also made a sharp criticism on classical rhetorical criticism and eventually made a break away from it. He considers it too limited and in need of supplementation with modern rhetoric. Wuellner, "Rhetorical Criticism," 171-85.

<sup>49</sup> C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts – Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1971).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism," 170.

<sup>51</sup> Watson, "Notes on history and Method," 113.

<sup>52</sup> Wuellner, "Rhetorical Criticism," 176-77.

<sup>53</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 7.

It [modern rhetoric] neither ignores the historical nature of a text nor does it solely depend upon it. It takes historical information into account, but rather than being descriptive it tries to understand the intention of the text and how values of the time are utilized in the argumentation. It is not trying to reconstruct the original situation, but rather to discover the argumentation of the text in its own right. It is looking at the social, cultural, and ideological values assumed in the premises, topics, and argumentation used.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, modern rhetoric also notices the importance of the social and historical context of the text which conditions the language/speech of argumentation although it does not aim to reconstruct the historical readers or the author behind the text. Its interest rather lies “in the situation of the text for the sake of argumentation.”<sup>56</sup> As such, the modern rhetoric functions as a link between the text and the social context in which the social context is assessed through the text.

**2.2.1. The New Rhetoric’s Mode of Interpretation:** Some of the techniques of modern rhetoric as identified by Perelman and Olbrechts–Tyteca are mentioned in the following:

Firstly, “definition in argument” presents two phases of reasoning which include: (i) Definitions that are supported or authenticated by argument. (ii) Definitions which themselves forms the arguments.<sup>57</sup>

Secondly, in “argumentation by sacrifice,” the sacrifice becomes “a measure of the value attributed to the thing for which the sacrifice is made.”<sup>58</sup>

Thirdly, “argument from authority” is a method of rhetoric reasoning “which uses the acts or opinions of a person or group of persons as a means of proof in support of a thesis.”<sup>59</sup> The validity of argument heavily depends on one’s reputation, honor and rank.

Fourthly, the “techniques of severance” restraints the interaction between the act and the person. The way of severance can be of two ways, namely, to consider the latter (the person) as a perfect being or the former (the act) as “a truth or the expression of a fact.”<sup>60</sup>

Lastly, “dissociation of concepts” brings about “change in the conceptual data that are used as the basis of argument.”<sup>61</sup> Using these modes of interpretation, an example can be given as to how the NT can be interpreted.

**2.2.2. The New Rhetoric in NT Interpretation:** By applying the New Rhetoric, G. W. Hansen interprets the argumentations in Galatians. He says that Paul’s use of “argument from authority” is identified in his claim for his apostleship (Gal. 1:1).<sup>62</sup> In Paul’s use of the Abrahamic story, one can identify “dissociation of ideas” which differentiates Paul’s message and the message of his rivals such as faith versus law.<sup>63</sup> Again, the rebuking of the rival starts with Paul’s definition of the gospel by emphasizing on the Christological centeredness of the gospel (Gal. 1:12, 15-16) and work of Christ among the gentiles through his mission (Gal. 1:16; 2:2; 2:7-8).<sup>64</sup> Paul is also seen as using “argument by severance” to differentiate “those of faith” who are within the circle of Abrahamic blessing (including the Gentiles) and “those of the works of the law” who are under curse including the Jews (Gal. 3:1-29).<sup>65</sup> Finally, Paul’s use of “argument by sacrifice” stresses on the value of something for which a sacrifice was made. Here, emphasis is given to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as the basis for the value of the freedom in Christ (Gal. 1:4; 2:4, 20-1; 3:1, 13-14; 4:4; 5:1).<sup>66</sup>

Unlike Greco-Roman rhetoric, Perelman and Olbrechts–Tyteca have succeeded quite well in differentiating the rhetorical situation from the historical situation, thereby, making it similar to a synchronic approach. There is also plurality in its approach as the theory is combined with other disciplines such as philosophy, “literary criticism, text linguistics, semiotics, social description, stylistics, reader-response criticism,

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<sup>55</sup> Watson, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 170.

<sup>56</sup> Lauri Thurén, *Rhetorical Strategy of 1 Peter with Special Regard to Ambiguous Expressions* (Abo: Abo Academy, 1990), 55.

<sup>57</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts – Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 212-13.

<sup>58</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts – Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 248-49.

<sup>59</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts – Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 305-07.

<sup>60</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts – Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 310-11.

<sup>61</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts – Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 413.

<sup>62</sup> Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians*, 97-140.

<sup>63</sup> Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians*, 116-17.

<sup>66</sup> Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians*, 121-22.

discourse analysis, and/or speech act theory.”<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, one must not forget that its plurality in approach also makes it difficult to categorize the theory.

### 3. Critical Appraisal of Rhetorical Criticism

By way of an appraisal, this section lays down the strengths and weaknesses of rhetorical criticism in biblical interpretation.

**3.1. Contributions of Rhetorical Criticism:** The following points represent the contribution of rhetorical criticism in the interpretation of the Scripture.

Firstly, considering the larger text than its fragments for interpretation helps the reader to know exactly “where” a particular passage functioned in relation to the whole text.<sup>68</sup>

Secondly, rhetorical criticism bridges the gap between form criticism and literary criticism.<sup>69</sup> While form criticism usually gets lost sight of the finished product, rhetorical criticism takes the text as it is and as the final product.

Thirdly, Burton L. Mack believes that rhetorical criticism, when taken with the social issue in view, can be the most promising form of literary criticism for reconstructing Christian origin.<sup>70</sup> It can help result in reading the Scripture to generate a personal, social, and cultural value than a mere content-oriented reading.<sup>71</sup>

Fourthly, rhetorical criticism changes the wrong perception of the “authors as active” and the “readers as passive” participants in the interpretation of the Scripture. It allows the readers of Scripture to be active, creative, and productive.<sup>72</sup>

Fifthly, Clifton Black mentions that rhetorical criticism can enhance one’s ability to hear the NT as the first audience might have heard it.<sup>73</sup>

Sixthly, rhetorical criticism may also work as a constructive framework through which some of the long-standing difficult questions may be analyzed and clarified. Black gives an example that appreciating “the classical canons for oratorical arrangement” (that is, the ordering of discourse) can help one to assess the debated textual integrity of 2 Corinthians and Philippians.<sup>74</sup>

Seventhly, as part of a synchronic approach to the text, rhetorical criticism can help one to appreciate the various aspects of the text such as “the practical, the political, the powerful, the playful, and the delightful aspects of religious texts.”<sup>75</sup>

Finally, the New Rhetoric in particular must be praised for its argumentative character because it takes into consideration the convincing and persuasive quality of biblical texts. Such rhetoric is dynamic and its message involves a communicative and contextual function.<sup>76</sup>

**3.2. Limitations of Rhetorical Criticism:** Despite its strengths, one can also identify the limitations of rhetorical criticism in biblical interpretation as mentioned in the following:

Firstly, there seems to be no “unanimity of conviction” regarding the specific conclusions of rhetorical critics.<sup>77</sup> Some even doubt that the classical rhetorical art was ever applied to written documents but only to speeches alone so that rhetorical criticism is irrelevant to the interpretation of written documents like the NT.<sup>78</sup>

Secondly, on the social ground, it has been asked if “all” the NT writings correspond to ancient rhetoric because ancient rhetoric was associated with the educated class of the society alone, whereas only few of the NT writings can be associated with the educated class of society.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Watson, “Notes on History and Method,” 115.

<sup>68</sup> Melick, “Literary Criticism,” 439.

<sup>69</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 17.

<sup>71</sup> Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” 460-61; cf. K. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1950), 49-59.

<sup>72</sup> Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” 461.

<sup>73</sup> Black, “Rhetorical Criticism and the NT,” 81-82.

<sup>74</sup> Black, “Rhetorical Criticism and the NT,” 82.

<sup>75</sup> Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” 461

<sup>76</sup> Jan Lambrecht, S.J., “Rhetorical Criticism and the New Testament,” *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 50/3 (1989):239-53.

<sup>77</sup> Melick, “Literary Criticism,” 446.

<sup>78</sup> But the argument for orality of Scripture may provide a possible interpretive factor for such view against New Testament text. See the critical comments of Black, “Rhetorical Criticism and Biblical Interpretation,” 256-57.

<sup>79</sup> Stamps, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 271.

Thirdly, rhetorical criticism does not come into terms with the “concept of inspiration” which the church has already affirmed long before.<sup>80</sup>

Fourthly, there is also no uniform or singular definition of the method rhetorical criticism. Historically, it has been understood as “an act of persuasion,”<sup>81</sup> but Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca understand it as an “argumentation.”<sup>82</sup> There are scholars who keep rhetorical criticism safely within the historical criticism (diachronic) because rhetoric was an integral part of the Greco-Roman practice,<sup>83</sup> whereas others see it as a synchronic approach to the text.<sup>84</sup>

Fifthly, Kennedy recognizes the limitations of his method as it cannot help “describe the historical Jesus or identify Matthew or John; they are probably irretrievably lost to scholarship.”<sup>85</sup> It has to depend on other methodologies for explaining the text because the historical reconstruction of historical scene by historical critics becomes determinant for explaining the text.<sup>86</sup> In other words, rhetorical criticism alone cannot determine the meaning of the text. Therefore, question arises as to how rhetorical criticism can be presented as “an independent, self-sufficient method.”<sup>87</sup>

Lastly, rhetorical criticism can be considered to be one-sided with its emphasis on the synchronic aspect of the text.<sup>88</sup>

In interpreting the NT through rhetorical criticism, it is important to keep in mind its limitations and contributions so as to interpret the scripture according to the purpose of rhetorical criticism.

### Conclusion

Rhetorical criticism consists of one of the many interpretive methods in biblical interpretation. The present study is such an introductory study of the presupposition, methods and principles, and a critical analysis of rhetorical criticism in NT studies. The present study limits its analysis to the ancient rhetoric and the modern rhetoric (New Rhetoric). It is learned from the study that the similarities and distinctions between the two modes of interpretation in rhetorical criticism overlapped in the way the text of the NT have been approached. While the Greco-Roman (ancient) rhetoric is inclined towards a diachronic approach, the modern rhetoric draws closer to a synchronic approach. On the other hand, one can also see the similarities between the two modes of interpretation because both the ancient and the modern rhetoric are concerned with the effect the method has upon the audience so that the readers become active participants in the process of interpretation.

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<sup>80</sup> Melick, “Literary Criticism,” 441.

<sup>81</sup> Jan Botha, “On the ‘Reinvention’ of Rhetoric,” *Scriptura* 31 (1989):18-22.

<sup>82</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Black, “Rhetorical Criticism and the NT,” 81.

<sup>84</sup> Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” 460-61.

<sup>85</sup> Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 158-59.

<sup>86</sup> Stamps, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 272.

<sup>87</sup> Lambrecht, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 248.

<sup>88</sup> Lambrecht, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 247.

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