Exploring Second Corinthians: Death and Life, Hardship and Rivalry

Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity 3


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Exploring Second Corinthians: Death and Life, Hardship and Rivalry is the second instalment (at the time of writing this review) in SBL’s new commentary series Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity (RRA). The RRA series “uses insights from sociolinguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, ethnography, literary studies, social sciences, cognitive science, and ideological studies in programmatic ways that enact sociorhetorical interpretation as an interpretive analytic.” This means that it is not a specific methodology; rather, the RRA series draws upon the insights of a multitude of interpretive strategies and engages in multifaceted dialogue with the texts and phenomena within its purview. The final product of this diverse analysis is a commentary that is unique among the many traditional commentaries typically found a scholar’s shelf. For this reason, I will limit my review to the commentary’s general approach rather than engage specific points of isolated exegetical issues.

Upon opening the commentary, the reader is presented with a detailed glossary of terms employed in the interpretation, suggesting from the very beginning that this is no ordinary commentary. This glossary proves helpful for readers unfamiliar with the discipline as they begin to navigate the commentary. This is followed by the standard introductory issues in a 2 Corinthians commentary: the composition of the letter, where
the three main views (the letter is unified, or a composite of two, or several letters) are presented in brief summaries. Oropeza takes the view that canonical 2 Corinthians is a combination of two letters consisting of chapters 1–9 and 10–13, rejecting the view that 10–13 is what we refer to as the “letter of tears.” This division frames the two main parts of the commentary. This is followed by a brief background to the situation of 2 Corinthians, with a familiar timeline of events into which we can place the letter.

The second half of the introduction deals with the rhetorical situation of the letter. Oropeza first discusses the issue of Paul as a rhetorician and seeks to establish the level of Paul’s rhetorical ability. While it will always remain a mystery as to what, if any, sort of rhetorical training Paul had, Oropeza makes the interesting and (to me) plausible suggestion, that, during Paul’s time in Tarsus, before his formal missionary work began (see Gal 1:21; Acts 9:30), he probably availed himself of the rhetorical handbooks available quite cheaply in the agora. This is followed by an analysis of the rhetorical structure of the letter itself. Oropeza engages with the current critique that Paul’s letters should be interpreted according to epistolary and not rhetorical conventions. Here he draws largely from the analysis of Christopher Forbes, who suggests that Paul’s letters are a unique blending of both epistles and speeches, created to meet a unique social context, and can be best described as “a new form of communication for ancient Mediterranean discourse” (32).

But in terms of a traditional commentary, here are where the similarities stop. Unlike the standard commentary, the concern is not primarily to situate the letter in its social and cultural context; in fact, there is almost no discussion in the introductory section of the city of Corinth or its people. Instead, following the methodology set out in the RRA series, the commentary employs a threefold interpretive strategy, viewing the text through the lens of rhetography, textural commentary, and rhetorical force as emerging discourse.

Rhetography is the “progressive, sensory-aesthetic, and/or argumentative texture of a text (rhetology) that invites a hearer/reader to create a graphic image or picture in the mind that implies a certain kind of truth and/or reality” (36), something akin to ekphrasis, descriptive language used to bring what is portrayed clearly before the sight. This “rhetorolect” is further categorised into six topoi or locations of thought that emerged within the Christian discourse: wisdom, prophetic, miracle, precreation, priestly, and apocalyptic discourses. According to Oropeza, in 2 Corinthians Paul works primarily within the rhetorolects of wisdom, prophetic, and apocalyptic.

Textural commentary includes inner texture (analyzing linguistic patterns within a text, structural elements, arguments, and language and language evoking feelings or the senses of the body), intertexture (recognizing representations of other texts and resources that
are external phenomena), social and cultural texture (exploring the nature of a text in terms of social and cultural language and how this evokes worldviews and attitudes and values of the people of the time), ideological texture (uses the language of interpretations of a text, the analysis of alliances and conflicts evoked by the language of texts, and the way the text and interpreters position themselves in relation to other individuals and groups), and sacred texture (the manner in which the text communicates insights into the relationship between the human and the divine).

Finally, the rhetorical force of the passage addresses how the text invites the audience “to picture particular aspects of their world in a specific way, and to respond to it accordingly” (40). This threefold strategy, with its various subcategories, is then employed in a detailed analysis of the text of 2 Corinthians, which forms the body of the commentary.

Turning to the overall structure, the commentary is first divided into two main parts: 2 Cor 1–9 and 10–13. These main parts are further divided into sections: section one, 1:1–7; section two, 1:8–2:13; and so on. Each section is then further divided into scenes: section one, first scene, 2 Cor 1:1–2; second scene, 2 Cor 1:3–7. These small scenes form the units of text to which Oropeza applies his threefold interpretive strategy.

Each scene is then analyzed in three consistent steps. The first step is the rhetorical interpretation. In every case, these are succinct and insightful. The strength of these one- to two-page overviews is that they take seriously the performative context of Paul’s letter, describing in vivid detail the imagery that each scene would conjure in the minds of the listener. By setting this imagery in the topoi of wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, and the like, the full rhetorical force of the passage is highlighted. For example, the discussion of the fool’s speech and the heavenly ascent (11:21b–12:13) really captures (I think) the profundity of that section of the performance. Oropeza’s description of a weak, plain ignoble day laborer traveling by flight to heaven, moving toward a new Eden, while being pursued and attacked by Satan really captures the sense of Paul’s testimony at this point.

The third interpretive step, rhetorical force as emergent discourse, like the rhetorical interpretation, is succinct and insightful. Here Oropeza proposes the impact the passage would have had on the audience’s interpretation of their world and how they should in turn respond to their surroundings. These short interpretations take up the imagery described in the rhetorical section and combine it with the social context of the Corinthians, as well as relevant primary sources, to suggest the way in which Paul wanted the Corinthians to respond. In a letter that makes such strong demands on the community, this interpretive step is insightful. For example, in 5:20–7:16, where Paul appeals for reconciliation on several fronts and for the Corinthians to see him as he truly is, focused study on how exactly he expected them to respond is insightful.
These two interpretive steps, to my mind, offer a unique contribution to our reading of 2 Corinthians. The combination works together well to highlight the impact that the performance of 2 Corinthians would have had on the first listener, a letter rich with vivid imagery at every turn. They would also serve as useful, short interpretations, particularly for the preacher who wants to draw out the full rhetorical impact intended by Paul. It is when we turn to the second interpretive step, the textural commentary of each scene, that the RRA series stands out from the traditional commentary. The depth of treatment at the textural commentary stage of each scene takes up almost the entirety of the commentary; it is also where I feel the approach of the RRA series suffers the most weakness.

Commentaries of this size (nearly 900 pages) serve their greatest purpose as reference points for the interpretation of specific verses and passages. One can turn to a particular verse in a standard commentary and be presented with various depths of interpretation on the original language, context, and general meaning. In this way, the researcher can work systematically through a passage, verse by verse. This, however, is not so simple in the RRA series.

Rather than take a verse-by-verse approach, the RRA series focuses on a section of scripture (anything from two verses to a paragraph), which is isolated into a scene. Having isolated the text, a series of interpretive layers are then laid over it, one after the other. At the textural level, these layers focus on the inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. But then these textures are further categorized; for example, inner texture could include argumentative texture, progressive texture, and so on. This makes for complex reading; to add to the complexity, there is no set format in each scene. That is, intertexture could be used on the same passage several times with various subcategories. This means that, rather than reading the passage verse by verse, each section of scripture is read and reread with different interpretive layers, each one drawing out the various features of the passage with each new reading.

As one might guess, this makes for lengthy and complex interpretation of each small section of the letter (2 Cor 2:14–17 alone consists of twenty-eight pages of interpretation!) that really needs to be read in its entirety fully to appreciate the complexity of interpretation. Put another way, if one wants to some detailed insight into a specific verse, this is not the commentary to do it. That said, however, the time spent working through these numerous layers of interpretation will reward the reader with a rich tapestry of meaning.

Turning to the back matter, there are over 140 pages of bibliography and indices, which testify to the depth of scholarship in the book. As would be expected, the bibliography is detailed and up to date and in itself is a valuable resource for the Corinthian scholar. In
summary, this is a valuable resource to the Corinthian scholar, as it takes a fresh approach to the letter, and its detailed analysis of the various textures complements the standard historical-critical investigation.