

Rhetorical Structure of *The Letter to the Romans*

The Apostle Paul relies on the goal and tools of forensic rhetoric for the structure of his communication with the church in Rome. Forensic rhetoric has as its end discovery of “the just and the unjust” [Aristotle, The Art of Rhetoric I.iii.5]. Where questions arise regarding “the just and the unjust,” discernment of an answer involves sorting among past understandings and occurrences.

Forensic rhetoric, with its focus on justice, often takes place in a courtroom. The prevalence of courtroom dramas on television has made forensic structure familiar to most of us. In a trial, between opening and closing statements, prosecution and defense present arguments for and against, arguments that include applicable laws, evidence, and testimony of witnesses.

In Romans, the Apostle Paul presents his case to the congregation. Who rightfully sits on the judgment seat? Determining jurisdiction then raises the question of the nature of that judge. Throughout the body of the letter, Paul sustains the two strands: jurisdiction [in whose court do these “dissensions” belong?] and the nature of the judge [impartial, loving, faithful to both covenants in a way we have yet to understand]. As part of the two strands, the apostle employs a series of ten rhetorical questions. Paul answers each himself, with the strong negative, μή γένοιτο:

3:3 Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

3:5 That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us?

3:31 Do we then overthrow law by this faith?

6:1 Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

6:15 Are we to sin because we are not under law, but under grace?

7:7 That the law is sin?

7:13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?

9:14 Is there injustice on God’s part?

11:1 I ask then, has God rejected God’s people?

11:11 So I ask, have they [Israel] stumbled so as to fall?

Over the course of the argument, Paul puts his listeners on trial for presumptuous judgmentalism and destructive despising of siblings within the family of faith. The apostle skillfully guides those usurping the role of judge from their assumed place on the judicial bench to the appropriate defendant’s chair. Remember that Paul, himself, had experienced a similar change of position and perspective [see Acts 9: 1-19]. For Paul, only God in Christ rightfully belongs on the judge’s bench; the Apostle knows this Judge as One who “works for good with those who love him” [8:28], and as One from whose love nothing can separate us [8:39].

Rhetorical Structure: Body of the Argument

We need first to examine the body of the Apostle’s argument, before considering his introduction and conclusion. Paul brackets his core content with mirror image twin sets of declaration/two questions [2:1-4] and two questions/declaration [14:10-13]. Paul’s use of similarly structured, double rhetorical questions, recalls for this reader the dual parallelism of Hebrew proverbs. In such parallelism, one proverb serves to reinforce or expand the meaning of the other. In Romans, Paul uses his second questions to underscore the content of his first. In each of the

double questions, using second person singular pronouns, the apostle addresses individuals in the congregation. The particle "or" (Greek "η") connects each pair of questions:

2:3-4 "Do you suppose that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience?"

14:10 "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?"

[Quotations from the RSV, with references from the Greek NT (Aland, et al)]

Paul precedes the first pair of questions and follows the second pair of questions with strong, similar declarations. Paul precedes the first pair of questions with a sharp accusation:

2:1-2 "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. We know that God's judgment rightly falls upon those who do such things."

Paul follows the final pair of questions with a strong, extended declaration, summarizing his understanding of the appropriate jurisdiction for cases of "dissension and difficulty" (16:17) among his fellow Christians:

14:10b-13 "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So each of us shall give account of himself to God. Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother."

In Romans 8, halfway between these twin sets of questions with statement, the Apostle rapidly fires off a series of questions and answers reiterating the same sentiment. We stand together before God, a judge who, in Jesus Christ, made himself known as One who loves us and works with us for the good. At this mid-point of his argument, Paul brackets three sets of rhetorical questions between an introductory question and his answer six verses later:

8:31 "What shall we say then to this?" [introductory question]

8:31b "If God is for us, who is against us?"

8:32 "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

8:33 "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?"

8:33b-34 "It is God who justifies, who is to condemn; is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?"

8:35a "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

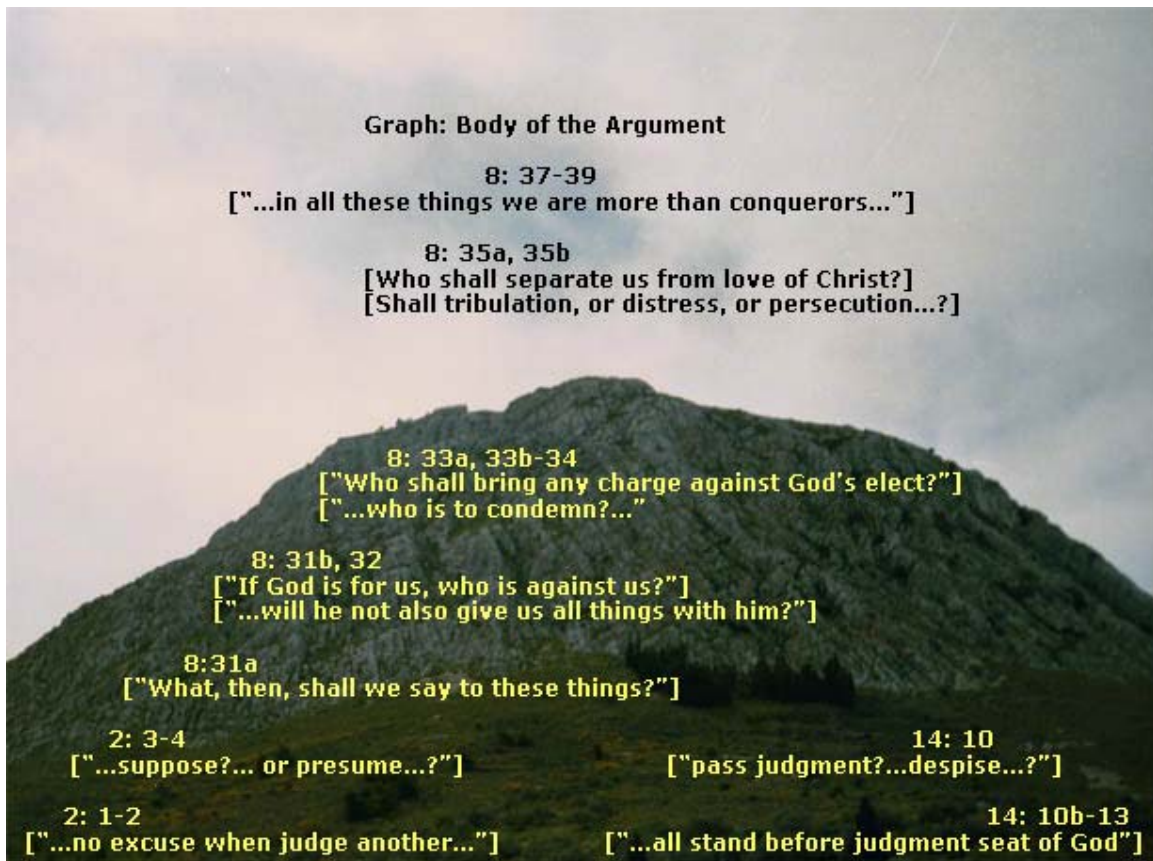
8:35b "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword [reader hears implied repetition "separate us from the love of Christ"] ?

8:37-9 "...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." [answer to introductory question/8:31]

Step by step, question by question, the Apostle leads us to a higher perspective. As we crest the mountaintop, Paul offers a panorama of creation. From this vantage point, we can see far beyond the low-lying swamp of presumptuous judgmentalism [2:3-4] and the deep-cut gully of

sibling hatred within the family of faith [14:10]. The Apostle offers us a God's-eye view of our faith journey. From his argument's peak in chapter eight, we glimpse both starting point and destination of the journey, from the rutted, muddied roads of "bondage to decay" traveled as slaves of sin, to the smoother sailing "glorious liberty" promised to God's adopted children [8:21].

Note: Although Paul discusses extensively in chapters 9-11 the two covenant issue of the relationship between Christians and Jews, I believe the peak of his argument occurs in chapter eight. Creation provides a broader context, the Creator God larger than either Jew or Christian can claim as partisan. Both the redemption of the whole creation and the inseparability of God's love for us underscore God's faithfulness and purpose [the kind of God/judge God is]. That broader context puts sibling rivalry among Abraham's children in its place. Paul reminds us that the table has enough seats for all, holds enough food [kosher or not, see 14: 13-23] to satisfy and share.



Opening and Closing Statements Establishing Rapport, Expressing Goodwill, Calling to Action

Exordia [opening statements]:

In an exordium, usually an opening statement, a speaker attempts to establish rapport with listeners, indicating goodwill toward them, and attesting to his/her reputation. Paul wraps Romans in two exordia [1: 1-15 and 15: 14-29/16: 1-16, the latter interrupted by a four-verse peroration described below].

Romans 1: 1-7 reputation [relying more on Christ's than his own, for good reason]

1: 8-15 goodwill

Romans 15: 14-29 reputation, goodwill

16: 1-16 reputation, goodwill

Although the wrap-around form seems unusual, it is understandable here, given the abundance of sharp, strong content, and the Apostle Paul's desire to connect with that congregation.

Perorations [summary statements]:

In a peroration, or summary statement, a speaker asks for, and tries to inspire specific action from hearers. The speaker anticipates that assenting to the conclusions drawn in the argument will result in certain behaviors demonstrative of that assent. The apostle Paul closes Romans with not one, but three perorations.

Each peroration begins with the same first-person, indicative verb "παρακαλω;" each concludes with a similarly-formulated benediction "ο δε Θεος της...":

Romans 12:1-15:13 extended peroration, double benediction

"I appeal to you (παρακαλω) to present your bodies a living sacrifice...May the God of **steadfastness and encouragement...**" (ο δε θεος της υπομονης...)"May the God of **hope...**" (ο δε θεος της ελπιδος...)

[Romans 15:14-29 exordium, recaps living sacrifice issue per Paul himself and Gentiles]

Romans 15:30-33 short peroration, benediction

"I appeal to you (παρακαλω) to strive together with me...May the God the **peace...**" (ο δε θεος της ειρηνης...)

[Romans 16:1-16 exordium]

Romans 16:17-20 short peroration, benediction

"I appeal to you (παρακαλω) to take note of dissension...May the God of **peace...**" (ο δε θεος της ειρηνης...)

Romans 16:21-23 greetings extended from Timothy, etc...

Romans 16:25-27 closing benediction, repeats phrase of opening exordium "υπακοην πιστεως" "to bring about the obedience of faith" [see 1:5b]

In Romans, the Apostle Paul calls on his hearers to acknowledge our indebtedness to God's grace [1:16-18], and to refocus our energies toward the transformation of ourselves [12:1-2] and the welcoming of each other into fellowship of faith [15:7].