

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Shepherd of Hermas*, one of the most popular extracanonical texts of the early church, is thoroughly paraenetic in nature. Across the three sections of the *Shepherd* (Visions, Parables, and Mandates), paraenesis is a unifying device.<sup>1</sup> At various times, readers have made the mistake of simply mirror reading texts that contain paraenesis. The thought is that if the author feels it necessary to tell his readers to refrain from these behaviors, then those readers must have been participating in them. Otherwise, the author would have no occasion for including such exhortation in his or her communication. This common reading has been almost universally rejected among scholars as too simplistic and a failure to account for the rhetorical function of much paraenesis.

Already in 1932, Burton Scott Easton described the use of vice lists as a means to describe “a condition in which supposedly he and his readers have no share.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, when Paul wrote a letter such as Romans and listed a litany of vices, the aim was not to indict the readers; rather, the vice list served to elevate their new

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<sup>1</sup> While not immediately obvious, apocalyptic material such as that found in Visions has one of two purposes: either to control the behavior of the audience or to exhort the audience to ethical living. In either situation, the author has an idea of how one ought to live and the rhetoric of apocalyptic aims to evoke the correct response from the audience.

<sup>2</sup> Burton Scott Easton, "New Testament Ethical Lists," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51, no. 1 (1932). More recently, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 138-141.

life in Christ. Clearly, simple mirror reading of one side of a communication cannot give a clear and accurate picture of the community concerns the author is addressing.

A discussion of preliminary issues regarding the *Shepherd of Hermas* might appear to be out of place, but the ethical concerns of this paper are not entirely unrelated to the issues of authorship, date, provenance, and integrity. How one answers these questions necessarily shapes the understanding of the situation for which this text is written that forms in the reader's mind. A brief discussion regarding these issues will make explicit the assumptions that lie behind the argument and conclusions of this paper.

The authorship of the *Shepherd* has been debated since the patristic period. The number of authors and their identities has ranged from one single author<sup>3</sup> to six. Without rehearsing all of the different options, it will suffice to say that this paper will assume that one person was responsible for the *Shepherd of Hermas*. The identity of that individual is dependent upon the date that one gives to the *Shepherd*. The problem with dating the *Shepherd* is that it is a composition that developed within the context of an oral culture.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a firm date cannot be established. Instead it is better

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<sup>3</sup> W. Coleborne, "The Shepherd of Hermas: A Case for Multiple Authorship and Some Implications," in *Studia Patristica 10* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1970), Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Osiek, "The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome: The Case of Hermas," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998). Note especially

to understand the *Shepherd* as being written in stages over a period of time. A working date for our purposes should be around the end of the first century, possibly into the first part of the second. The provenance of the *Shepherd* is almost universally accepted as central Italy, and most would specify Rome specifically.<sup>5</sup> The answer to the question of integrity is related to the question of date. If one requires a firm date for the *Shepherd*, then one will find it nearly impossible to maintain literary integrity of the text; however, by reading the text as composed over time (yet by the same person), the final product's composite nature is not a verdict against literary integrity.<sup>6</sup>

When Hermas writes the *Shepherd* to Christians in Rome, there are clearly specific community concerns that he wants to address. As analysis has repeatedly shown, the *Shepherd of Hermas* is a veritable treasure house of information regarding the character of early Christianity in Rome<sup>7</sup>, but the picture one forms of the character of Roman Christianity to which Hermas writes depends on the way one sorts out the

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Osiek's argument that what appears to be sloppy redaction and poor composition makes more sense in the context of an oral culture.

<sup>5</sup> Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> I have used the example of the way a doctoral dissertation is composed. It would be unusual indeed if a dissertation were produced all at once. Moreover, scholars sometimes publish individual articles that eventually find their way into the dissertation. These smaller compositions are read individually and upon discovering the final product, it would be possible to arrive at the conclusion that the author of the larger document was simply a redactor of the other articles. Of course, we know this is not the case.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 90-99, 218-236. Some of Lampe's deductions border on informed speculation, but his use of the *Shepherd* is instructive.

paraenetic material contained in the *Shepherd*. The remainder of this paper will focus on three key compositional features of the *Shepherd of Hermas* that indicate material that is indicative of the situation of early Christianity in Rome: material discussed in greater detail and/or at greater length, second person material that shifts from singular to plural, and Hermas' autobiographical material. In the discussion of each category, we will examine illustrative texts from each section of the *Shepherd* in order to show the consistency of the principles across the entire text. When one considers these compositional characteristics, the picture of Roman Christianity around the turn of the first century can come into sharper focus.

## II. TOPICS DEVELOPED IN GREATER DEPTH AND DETAIL

As was said above, the *Shepherd of Hermas* overflows with paraenesis. Much of this is general Christian exhortation to which it would be inappropriate to apply a simple mirror reading approach. These general exhortations and lists of virtues and vices stand in contrast to material that Hermas develops at greater length or in greater detail. In this section, we will see some examples of Hermas' use of general ethical exhortation and then examine some passages where Hermas develops the discussion in greater detail and/or dwells on a subject at greater length. As a result, the more detailed and developed topics will distinguish themselves from the rest and allow us to understand their higher degree of relevance to Roman Christians.

### **General Exhortation**

We could multiply examples of general exhortation in the *Shepherd* as this is the material that occupies the largest portion of the text. At the same time, it is important to illustrate these generalities in order to demonstrate the contrast that appears when a topic is discussed in more detail. In *Vision 3.5*, Hermas asks the Woman about the stones that are being brought to the tower. After a description of “the squared and white stones that fit together at the joints” as “apostles, bishops, teachers and deacons” and how they “live reverently towards God and perform their

duties...in a holy and respectful way,” (*Vis.* 3.5.1) the Woman spends no more than two sentences describing the remaining kinds of stones.<sup>8</sup> She describes the stones “brought from the dry land” as “ones the Lord has approved, because they walk in the uprightness of the Lord and carry out his commandments” (*Vis.* 3.5.3). This description of the stones is a general description of the true Christian, but it does not contain anything specific enough to allow the conclusion that there were some in the audience who were doing the opposite.

In *Mandate* 3, the Shepherd commands Hermas,

Love the truth and let all truth come from your mouth, so that the spirit that God made to live in this flesh may be recognized as true by everyone; in this way the Lord who dwells in you will be glorified. For the Lord is true in his every word, and there is no lie in him. And so, those who reject the Lord and defraud him, not handing over to him the deposit they received. For they received from him a spirit that does not lie; if they return it to him as a liar, they defile the commandment of the Lord and become defrauders (*Mand.* 3.1-2).

Clearly Hermas does not mean to indict the entire audience with these words. Instead, the objective is to describe generally behavior that is pleasing to God and a common characteristic of those who are not living lives that glorify God. Of course, there are some among the audience of the *Shepherd* to whom this may apply, but this is not intended primarily as an indictment against them.

### **Developed Material**

In contrast to this general material, at times Hermas develops a topic to such a degree

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations are from Bart Ehrman’s translation unless otherwise noted.

that it is obviously a serious concern and that there are specific examples of the behavior that Hermas has in mind when writing the exhortation. Often, this material regards repentance, marriage matters, and behavior of the wealthy Christians toward the poor Christians and the trappings of business affairs for Christians.<sup>9</sup> Hermas gives his teaching about these matters, but then he goes further to describe situations more fully and to anticipate questions and offer responses to them.

In *Vision 2.2*, the Woman tells Hermas that his “offspring...have rejected God, blasphemed the Lord, and betrayed their parents with a great evil” (*Vis. 2.2.1*). Here, the “offspring” that have rejected God are best understood as members of the Christian community. Osiek argues that family imagery in *Vision 2.2* should be read in the same way as *Vision 1.3.1* where the critique is definitely evoking imagery of *paterfamilias* responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> We will return to *Vision 1.3* in section three. In *Vision 2.2*, however, the focus is on the children rather than Hermas’ responsibilities for his household. There is precedent in Christian tradition for paternal imagery to talk about other Christians. In Philemon, Paul describes Onesimus as his son, whom he begat

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussions on these topics, please see Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Knowing How to Preside over His Own Household": Imperial Masculinity and Christian Asceticism in the Pastorals, Hermas, and Luke-Acts," in *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta: Soc of Biblical Literature, 2003), Carolyn Osiek, *Rich and Poor in the Shepherd of Hermas: An Exegetical-Social Investigation*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Monograph Series; 15 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983), Christine Trevett, "I Have Heard from Some Teachers: The Second-Century Struggle for Forgiveness and Reconciliation," in *Retribution, Repentance, and Reconciliation* (Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 54.

(ἐγέννησα) while he was in prison. Paul calls Timothy his child (1 Cor 4:17) and 1 and 2 Timothy both address Timothy as Paul's child (1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 1:2). Hermas also addresses the readers as children in *Vision* 3.9.1. Finally, in the instructions that the Woman gives to Hermas, he is to make known to them "these words that the Master has commanded me to reveal to you" (*Vis.* 2.2.4). This is in contrast to his instruction in *Vision* 1.3 to "admonish" his family. The criticism is clearly of the children rather than of Hermas, which makes a reading of *paterfamilias* responsibilities out of place here. If the focus was on Hermas as *paterfamilias*, the criticism would be of Hermas' failure to maintain his household as in *Vis.* 1.3.1. Following this description of the problems at work in the children, the Woman tells Hermas that "all the sins they formerly committed will be forgiven them...if they repent from their whole heart and remove doublemindedness from it" (*Vis.* 2.2.4). Then, she goes further and quotes "the Master,"

If there is any more sinning once this day has been appointed, they will not find salvation. For there is a limit to repentance for those who are upright, and the days of repentance for all the saints are complete. But the outsiders will be able to repent until the final day (*Vis.* 2.2.5).

This further explanation about repentance shows Hermas anticipating questions and scenarios that his readers are sure to bring up in discussing the teaching on repentance. These are serious concerns similar to the Thessalonians' question about death that Paul responds to in 1 Thessalonians. These are either issues that Hermas anticipates the readers raising or issues that have already been raised in the debate over whether repentance is allowed (Cf. *Vis.* 4.3). In either case, the revelations about

repentance surely indicate that there was indeed a serious exigency surrounding the possibility for repentance among the Christians that Hermas is addressing.

The entire discussion of *Mandate* 10 (10.1-10.3) surrounds the topic of grief and the perils it poses to righteousness. The Shepherd describes at great length how grief is related to irascibility and doublemindedness and discusses how these spirits crop up in the course of involvement with business matters. At the end of *Mand.* 10.1, the Shepherd seems to arrive at a conclusion saying, “For where the Lord dwells, there is also great understanding. Therefore cling to the Lord, and you will understand and perceive all things” (*Mand.* 10.1.6), but in 10.2, he continues the topic of grief and explains how “grief wears out the holy spirit [sic] and then again saves” (*Mand.* 10.2.1). The Shepherd’s elaboration of the problem of grief and its association with business affairs continues through 10.3.3 and concludes in 10.3.4 with an exhortation to “cleanse yourself” and “cast grief away.” The length at which Hermas attends to this issue of grief, accompanied by irascibility and doublemindedness, indicates that this is an issue with the Christians Hermas addresses that is causing him considerable concern and that requires exposition.

In *Similitude* 2, the Shepherd tells Hermas the parable of the elm tree and the vine.<sup>11</sup> The entirety of *Similitude* 2 is devoted to describing the way rich Christians and poor Christians support one another. The rich support the poor with money and necessities while the poor support the rich with their prayers, in which they are richer

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of the symbolism in this parable, see Osiek, *Rich and Poor*, 146-153.

than the rich because they do not have the hindrances of wealth. In their cooperation, they both “share in an upright work” (*Sim.* 2.9). As with the *Mandate* regarding repentance, Hermas anticipates objections and questions to his teaching:

And so, people may think that the elm tree bears no fruit; but they neither know nor understand that when a drought comes, the elm tree nourishes the vine by holding water; and the vine, since it has an undiminished supply of water, produces fruit for two, both for itself and for the elm. Thus also, those who are poor who pray to the Lord on behalf of the rich bring their own wealth to completion; and again those who are rich and supply the poor with what they need bring their souls to completion (*Sim.* 2.8).

This parable exhibits the same elaboration and conversational aspects as the previous examples from *Visions* and *Mandates*. Again, the concern is with wealth and the hindrance that wealth poses to the cultivation of righteousness. It is again clear that this topic is an important concern for Hermas and his audience.

These are simply three examples of the kind of elaboration that serves as a key to concerns facing Hermas and his Christian brothers and sisters in Rome. Again, this does not mean that Hermas is not concerned with the topics that he discusses in less detail and shorter length. But the concerns that Hermas takes the time to craft as carefully as the examples here given are more pressing and dangerous in the mind of Hermas. I would also argue that these topics are more applicable to his direct audience than those that are less fully developed. In the next section, we turn to a grammatical device that Hermas uses to direct his exhortations and judgments more pointedly to his audience.

### III. SHIFT FROM SINGULAR TO PLURAL IN SECOND PERSON MATERIAL

In the course of Hermas' narrative, there is often occasion for Hermas to direct exhortation or judgment directly at the audience. He deftly achieves this in a grammatical shift that is undetectable in translation, the shift from singular to plural in second person narrative material. The Woman and the Shepherd repeatedly address Hermas in the singular, but when the grammar shifts to plural in number, the dialogue leaves the closed narrative world and draws the audience into the narrative and involves them personally in all that is said therein.

The second person plural material in the *Visions* conforms to the apocalyptic character of them. Paraenesis is still active in this context calling the audience to repentance and righteous living so that they will escape the beast. In *Vision 4*, the Woman is telling Hermas that he has “escaped a great affliction...because you (sg.) were not of two minds” (4.2.4). Then, in 4.2.5 Hermas is commanded to go and “explain the great acts of the Lord to his chosen ones.” At the beginning of the next sentence, the shift to second person plural occurs when Hermas writes,

If then all of you prepare and repent before the Lord from your (still pl.) whole heart, you will be able to escape [the beast]—if your heart becomes clean and blameless and you serve the Lord blamelessly the rest of your days. Cast your anxieties upon the Lord and he will take care of them. Trust in the Lord, you who are of two minds, because he can do all things; he both diverts his anger from you and sends punishments to you who are doubleminded. Woe to those who hear these words and disobey. It would be better for them not to have been born (*Vis* 4.2.5-6).

So, the second person plural material in *Vision 4* serves to exhort the audience to repent and live righteous lives so that they will escape the beast. It is not the aim of this paper to interpret the apocalyptic images contained in the *Visions*, but it will suffice to recognize that the beast is clearly something dangerous that is to be avoided.

*Mandate 12* is the culmination of the *Mandates*. Outside *Mandate 12*, there is only one instance of a second person plural (*Mand. 4.1.10*). By contrast, there are more than fifteen second person plural references in *Mandate 12*. *Mandate 12.6* is the very end of the *Mandates* and is related primarily in the second person plural. The Shepherd says, “Listen to me and fear the one who can do all things, who both saves and destroys. Keep these commandments, and you will live to God” (*Mand. 12.6.3*). The paraenesis in *Mandate 12* is rather general in character, but the entire mandate points back to the previous eleven. The absence of the second person plural before *Mandate 12* only increases the effect of the device. Having related all eleven *Mandates*, Hermas makes the shift to second person plural in order to seize the audience, draw them into the narrative, and impress upon them the importance of all that went before.

In *Similitude 1*, Hermas is given a parable about a city. *Similitude 1.3* begins with a harsh vocative, “You foolish, doubleminded, and miserable person!” The rest of the parable is the Shepherd’s explanation that amassing wealth on earth will

eventually be for naught when the “ruler of this country” casts them out. In *Sim.* 1.8,

Hermas gives the counterpart to his contrast:

Instead of fields, then, purchase souls that have been afflicted, insofar as you can, and take care of widows and orphans and do not neglect them; spend your wealth and all your furnishings for such fields and houses as you have received from God.

Each of the imperatives in this parable is plural, a clear sign that this material is both important to Hermas and also directly applicable to his audience. This shift to a plural verb is intended to involve the audience personally in the narrative action and thereby pronounce an indictment against them for their selfish and unrighteous behavior.

Clearly, the concern about wealth prompts the arresting shift to the plural from the singular. Again, the shift serves to capture the audience’s attention and impress upon them the gravity of the material being presented.

The effectiveness of this grammar-based literary device is rooted in the oral performance context of the *Shepherd*. When reading the text, the shift from singular to plural appears as poor composition or as indication of clumsy redaction of disparate sources. As has been shown, this is not the case; this is an intentional literary device that serves a specific rhetorical purpose that is readily apparent when one thinks of the oral performance setting. When the text is read or recited, the audience is pushed and pulled between positions of spectator and participant with the aim of shaping the audience’s opinions about the material presented. In other words, the device is thoroughly rhetorical.

#### IV. HERMAS' AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

The final category of material for our discussion is material regarding the life of Hermas himself. Of course, it is difficult (if possible at all) to ascertain the historicity of this material. It has been argued that Hermas is at least partially pseudonymous.<sup>12</sup> The autobiographical material is in line with classical tradition of paraenesis where a common convention is to use the author as an example to be followed. As Malherbe notes, "personal examples in particular were used because they were regarded as more persuasive than words and as providing concrete models to imitate." Moreover, this convention of personal example is used in pseudonymous texts as well as authentic.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the authenticity of the autobiographical material is largely irrelevant to the paraenetical strategy. Among Malherbe's citations of this convention, no reference is given to the *Shepherd of Hermas*, but as we shall see, this device is employed across the text. Again, we will only be examining a small sampling of these examples in the interest of brevity.

In *Vision* 3.5-3.6, Hermas inquires of the Woman about the identity of the stones he sees in the vision of the building of the tower. In *Vision* 3.6.5-6a Hermas

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<sup>12</sup> Philippe Henne, *L'unité Du Pasteur D'hermas: Tradition Et Rédaction*, Cahiers De La Revue Biblique, 31 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1992), 7. See also Lampe, 218-236. for a discussion of the person of Hermas.

<sup>13</sup> Malherbe, 135-138.

asks the Woman when the round, white stones will be useful for building the tower, and the Woman answers Hermas in 3.6.6b-7

When the wealth that beguiles them is cut off from them...then they will be useful to God. For just as a round stone cannot be made square unless it has something cut off and discarded, so also with those who are rich in this age: if their wealth is not cut off from them, they cannot be useful to the Lord. You should know this above all from your own case. When you were wealthy, you were of no use; but now you are useful and helpful in life.

Clearly, this autobiographical material is meant to set an example for the readers to follow. Hermas was once a businessman like those to whom he is writing, and he presents himself as the template for others in his former situation to pattern themselves after.

In *Mandate 3*, the subject is love of truth and those who lie and defile the spirit. In 3.5, the Shepherd tells Hermas to

guard these matters so that the lies you spoke before in your business affairs may themselves become trustworthy when these other words are found to be true. For even those other ones can become trustworth. If you guard these matters and from now on speak only the truth, you will be able to give yourself life. And whoever hears this commandment and avoids lying most wickedly will live to God.

Again, Hermas' former life of deficient Christian living serves as an example for the audience. It is implied that the audience should identify with Hermas' former life and strive to follow his example of righteousness. The use of the personal example also indicates that the mindset that exists in the wealthy person is a serious problem in Hermas' perception. The love of truth is of such vital importance for Hermas that it warrants use of the most effective rhetorical form of exhortation available.

In *Similitude 7*, Hermas asks the Shepherd to “order the punishing angel to leave my house, because he is afflicting me terribly” (*Sim. 7.1*). Here, Hermas returns to discussions of family life. Here, Hermas references *paterfamilias* conventions again (Cf. *Vis. 1.3*), but the rest of the material seems to indicate that this family imagery is representative of the Christian community. The audience to whom Hermas has brought the message of repentance is most clearly the audience of the text, the Christian assembly before whom the *Shepherd* would have been read. Hermas is told that he cannot escape affliction while those of his “household” suffer affliction for their sin for a time after their repentance. The difference again between this passage and the family imagery in *Vision 1.3* is that Hermas is not chastised for the state of his “household.” The Shepherd explains to Hermas the reason for his suffering alongside them rather than criticizing the management of his household as the Woman did in *Vision 1*. The key passage is in *Similitude 7.4*:

“But look, Lord,” I said, “they have in fact repented from their whole heart.”  
“I myself know they have repented from their whole heart,” he replied. “But do you think,” he said, “that the sins of those who repent are forgiven on the spot? Not at all! But the one who repents must torment his own soul and become mightily humble in his every deed and be afflicted with many and various afflictions. And if he should endure the afflictions that come upon him, the one who created and empowered all things will be fully compassionate and bring him some healing.”

Here, Hermas anticipates a potential objection to Hermas’ program of repentance. Some who repent will still have some troubles through which to persevere; no one should expect an instant remedy to undo long periods of doublemindedness. As with the developed material and second person material dealing with repentance, the

autobiographical material serves to indicate the pressing nature of this issue for the Roman Church.

The importance of personal examples for ethical exhortation is well illustrated in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Whether or not all of the autobiographical material contained in the *Shepherd* is authentic is clearly irrelevant. The author portrays himself as having experienced the same lifestyle as those in his audience and also as having given it up in order to pursue righteousness. What increases the effect of this material is the way it is woven into the rest of the text. The convention can be used in a homogenous narrative of personal example, but as we have seen with the other categories, the rhetorical effect is increased when Hermas varies and alternates his use of rhetorical devices.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown how three compositional features of the *Shepherd of Hermas* can be used to sift through the paraenetic material that characterizes this text across all three of its sections. Material that is developed in more detail and/or at greater length should be read as indicating primary concerns for the author. The oral context of the *Shepherd's* presentation makes the switch from singular to plural in second person material an effective rhetorical device for converting the listeners from spectators to participants in the presentation. And finally, autobiographical material, whether historically authentic or not, serves to present the narrator of the *Shepherd* as an example for the audience to model themselves after. The narrator identifies with the situation of the audience, but then in portraying himself as an example, he implicitly exhorts the audience to forsake the lifestyle and business activities in which they are engaged and follow the path of repentance to righteousness.

These categories and observations make explicit the criteria and methodology that scholars such as Henne, Lampe, and Osiek have been engaged in implicitly for many years; however, readers new to the *Shepherd of Hermas* might feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information and the somewhat harsh and overbearing nature with which Hermas appears to approach his audience. Hopefully, the considerations outlined in this paper provide some tools for reading the *Shepherd of Hermas* that allow the reader to more fully understand the rhetorical construction of paraenesis and to arrive at a more accurate picture of early Christianity in Rome.

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