

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: A NEW METHOD TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

I have been asked several times to present orally—and in a non-technical way—the ‘rhetorical analysis’ (also called in French: *structurelle*¹). At the request of the Portuguese journal *Brotéria*, I wrote down this brief presentation which had taken shape little by little, according to the rules of oral style². The appraising feedback that I got for this article encourages me to use it as a foreword, for want of a better substitute, for the readers seeking a first approach to the method and the fruits that it can bear for a renewal of biblical exegesis. This draft has benefited from the remarks and suggestions of several readers, whom I thank warmly.

The subtitle of these few pages is at once entirely true and completely false. It is true, because so far, this method has only been applied systematically to a relatively small number of texts; moreover short texts, like psalms, rather than entire books.³ The method is new also because it is only recently that it has known an important development: an increasing number of exegetes, indeed, are interested in the composition of the texts they are studying. One must add that it is only in its beginnings, in as much as very few authors can use it with true proficiency. However, it would be false to pretend that rhetorical analysis is new, since its origins date back to the middle of the 18th century, with the *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* by R. Lowth (1753), and mostly to the turn of the 19th century with the work of J. Jebb and most of all T. Boys, two major authors whom a large majority of exegetes have nevertheless never heard of.

Another point needs to be made concerning the subtitle: ‘A new method to understand the Bible’. Is the rhetorical analysis truly an exegetical method? The recent document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*,⁴ introduces ‘Rhetorical Analysis’ as the first of ‘New Methods of Literary

¹ The method has been used under this appellation by several authors: J. Radermakers, *Au fil de l'Évangile selon saint Matthieu*, Heverlee – Louvain 1972); *La Bonne Nouvelle de Jésus selon saint Marc*, Bruxelles 1974); Id. – P. Bossuyt, *Jésus, Parole de la grâce selon saint Luc*, Bruxelles 1981); M. Girard, *Les Psaumes. Analyse structurelle et interprétation*, I. Ps 1-50, Montréal – Paris 1984); Id. *Les Psaumes redécouverts. De la structure au sens*, II. Ps 51-100; III. Ps 101-150, Montréal 1994; I. Ps 1-50; *Ibid.*, 1996).

² ‘A Análise retórica. Um novo método para compreender a Bíblia’, *Brot.* 137 (1993) 391-408; also published in Italian: ‘Un nuovo metodo per comprendere la Bibbia: l’analisi retorica’, *CivCatt* (1994) III, 121-34 (reproduced in «*E ora, scrivete per voi questo cantico*». *Introduzione pratica all’analisi retorica*, 1. *Detti e proverbi*, ReBib 3, Roma 1996] 9-21); in French: ‘L’analyse rhétorique, une nouvelle méthode pour comprendre la Bible’, *NRTh* 116 (1994) 641-57; in Arabic: ‘Al-tahlīl al-balāġī, ṭarīqa ġadīda li-’idrāk ma’ānī al-kitāb al-muqaddas’, *Al-Machriq* 70 (1996) 391-410.

³ A. Vanhoye, *La Structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Paris 1963, 1976²); R. Meynet, *L'Évangile selon saint Luc, analyse rhétorique*, RhBib 1, I-II, Paris 1988 (italian trans.: *Il vangelo secondo Luca*, ReBib 1, Rome 1994); P. Bovati – R. Meynet, *Le Livre du prophète Amos*, RhBib, Paris 1994; italian ed.: *Il libro del profeta Amos*, ReBib 2, Roma 1995 (and the other volumes published in RhBib and ReBib).

⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Rome 1993.

Criticism'; in fact, it distinguishes under this title three different methods: the 'Classical rhetoric', which is the application of Graeco-Roman classical rhetoric to biblical texts, the 'biblical literary tradition' and the 'new rhetoric'. 'Classical rhetoric' is what the Americans call 'rhetorical criticism'; the 'rhetorical analysis' of this book, on the other hand, is exactly what the document of the biblical commission calls the 'biblical literary tradition'.⁵ It would be perhaps more accurate to say that it is but one of the operations, one of the multiple steps of the exegetical work, along with the textual criticism, lexicographic enquiry, grammatical and syntactical analysis, history of the text, determination of the literary genres, *etc.* This somehow reduces its significance but, on the other hand, acknowledges its importance. In this light, rhetorical analysis is no longer another method, which one can choose among others or discard; but it has become an indispensable step in exegetical research. Should one choose to leave this debate aside, one can always say that it is a new 'approach' to biblical texts.⁶

Like all other exegetical approaches, the aim of rhetorical analysis is to understand the texts. It is convinced that, in order to reach this aim, it is important, almost indispensable, to bring the *composition* of the text to light. And, first of all, to establish its limits. Exactly as a linguist would identify the limits of the sentences of the corpus he is studying. The biblical texts, except from the psalms, have indeed no boundaries marked by either titles or typography (such as returns which would indicate paragraphs). The problem is not new: all exegetes experience the same difficulties in determining the beginning and end of literary units. The only two unquestionable limits of a biblical book are the beginning and end of the book; inside the book, one has nonetheless to divide! One does it, usually, following empirical methods. The historico-critic exegesis, which has ruled unchallenged for a century, tells us that only small units can be considered; 'forms' (miracle story, apophthegm, parable, *etc.*). It has taught us to read these small units distinct from one another; according to this method, the gospels (and also the books of the prophets) were nothing but rather ill-assorted collections of small units, which circulated among primitive communities, and that an editor (a collector!) decided one day to compile without a true composition. Rhetorical analysis pretends to the contrary, if one can reasonably imagine that small stories

⁵ 'Other exegetes concentrate upon the characteristic features of the biblical literary tradition. Rooted in Semitic culture, this display a distinct preference for symmetrical compositions, through which one can detect relationships between different elements in the text. The study of the multiple forms of parallelism and other procedures characteristic of the Semitic mode of composition allows for a better discernment of the literary structure of texts, which can only lead to a more adequate understanding of their message' (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 42-43).

⁶ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* distinguishes between the 'methods' and the 'approaches'; in a first draft, only 'The Historical-Critical Method' was considered as an 'approach'; in the definitive draft, 'Rhetorical Analysis' was promoted from the subaltern rank of 'approach' to that of 'method'; see A. Vanhoye, 'L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa. Riflessione circa un documento della Commissione Biblica', *CivCatt* (1994) III, 3-15 (the author was the Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission).

circulated separately at first, the evangelists were nonetheless genuine authors, who organised their material in intricate compositions. Rhetorical analysis pretends that these compositions do not obey the rules of graeco-roman rhetoric, but the specific laws of Hebraic rhetoric, of which the authors of the New Testament are the direct inheritors.⁷

But enough generalities and principles! The following examples will speak for themselves. Let us begin at the beginning, which is the minimal unit, the distich, or bimember segment:

For not in **my bow** DO I TRUST,
nor can **my sword** SAVE ME. (Ps. 44.7)

The mere fact that the same thing is repeated twice, in two different ways, ‘leads the gaze to a sense which can only exist “between the lines”. To hear this, points me to an *idea*, other than its materializations but inseparable from them’.⁸ The reader can read the rest of Ps. 44 and see how the whole poem, which contains twenty-eight distichs (or bimember segments), walks on two feet from beginning to end. The ‘parallelism of the members’, as it is called by Lowth, is the fundamental characteristic of Hebraic poetry; more generally, this bi-polarity marks the entirety of biblical literature. Things are always said twice, since truth would not be encapsulated in one affirmation, but given in the interaction of two complementary affirmations, or in the shock of contrasts.

Like this short text of parallel composition (Lk. 11.31-32), chosen among a thousand examples: the second part seems a simple repetition of the first part, what we might call a ‘doublet’, redundant if not useless. But complementarity adds to the function of insistence which one cannot ignore (repetition is the first figure of rhetoric!), in this case multiple: the double complementarity, sexual, between a woman (‘the queen’) and the ‘men’, and geographical, between the ‘South’ and the North (‘Nineveh’), is a way of indicating the whole (all gentiles will judge this generation). Furthermore, there is also a necessary chronological complementarity between to ‘listen to’ and to ‘repent’, and between the ‘wisdom’ of the king (‘Solomon’) and the ‘proclamation’ of the prophet (‘Jonas’), which is a way of saying that Jesus is at once king and prophet. Finally, there is the complementarity between the centripetal movement which brings the queen of the South ‘from the ends of the earth’ to Israel and the centrifugal movement which brings Jonas from Israel to Nineveh. This example shows that when two literary units seem totally similar, one must not forget to spot the differences which perhaps are richer in meaning than the similarities.

⁷ See R. Meynet, ‘Pré-supposés de l’analyse rhétorique, avec une application à Mc 10,13-52’, in C. Coulot, ed., *Exégèse et Herméneutique: Comment lire la Bible?*, LeDiv 158, Paris 1994, 69-111 (redrafted in *Rhetorical Analysis*, JSOT.S 256, Sheffield 1998, Chapter 4: ‘Presuppositions of Rhetorical Analysis’, 168-181).

⁸ P. Beauchamp, preface to R. Meynet, *L’Analyse rhétorique*, 11-12 (English transl.: *Rhetorical Analysis*, 9-15).

+ ³¹ The queen of **THE SOUTH** *will rise* at the judgment
 with the men of this generation and judge them,
 : because she came from the ends of the earth
 : to LISTEN TO **THE WISDOM** of Solomon
 = and see, there is here more than Solomon!

+ ³² The men of **NINEVEH** *will get up* at the judgment
 with this generation and judge it,
 : because THEY REPENTED at **THE PROCLAMATION** of Jonah,
 = and see, there is here more than Jonah!

The following example is of the same order, but provides a nice concentric construction (Lk. 14.7-14):

⁷ He was *saying* to those who were invited a parable,
 when he noticed how they chose **THE FIRST PLACES**,
saying to them:

+ ⁸ ‘WHEN YOU ARE INVITED	by someone to a wedding banquet,
- do not sit down	AT THE FIRST PLACE ,
. in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by him,	
. ⁹ and will come <i>he who invited</i> you and him and <i>say to you</i> :	
: “Give place to this man”.	
= And then you will begin with SHAME	
= to take THE LAST PLACE .	

----- ¹⁰ But, -----

+ WHEN YOU ARE INVITED,	
- go to fall	AT THE LAST PLACE ,
. so that,	
. when comes <i>he who invited</i> you, he may <i>say to you</i> :	
: ‘Friend, go up HIGHER ’.	
= Then there will be for you GLORY	
= in the presence of all who are guests with you.	

¹¹ For every one **WHO EXALTS HIMSELF** **WILL BE HUMBLLED**
 an **WHO HUMBLDES HIMSELF** **WILL BE EXALTED**.⁹

⁹ The translations, very close to the original texts, are mine.

The rewriting of this text aims to show how verse 10 is parallel, and opposed in all respects, to the verses 8-9; with the necessary variations, however, to avoid a too mechanical parallelism. One should note, in verse 10, the opposition ‘to fall’ – ‘go up’, as well as the variation ‘higher’ (and not ‘at the first place’ expected) which prepares for the opposition between ‘exalted’ and ‘humbled’ in verse 11. Such are the limits which are assigned to this text by almost every modern edition of the Bible. For the western reader, heir to the Graeco-Romans, it is obvious that a parable should end with the lesson that is drawn from it, as often do the stories of Aesop or La Fontaine. Verse 11 fulfils this function admirably.

It is not the way, however, that biblical texts are organized. Jesus’ speech is indeed not over. To cut it short at verse 11 would be like amputating the following segment from its second member:

Unless the Lord builds the house,
in vain labor the builders (Ps. 127.1).

Anyone can see that the sentence is not over! After having addressed the guests (7-10), Jesus now speaks to the host (12-14):

¹² And he said also to the man who had invited him:

+ ‘WHEN YOU HOLD	a dinner or a banquet,			
– do not call	YOUR FRIENDS,	BROTHERS,	KINSMEN,	RICH NEIGHBORS,
. lest they also		<i>invite you in return</i>		
= and you be repaid.				
----- ¹³ But, -----				
+ WHEN YOU HOLD	a feast,			
– invite	THE POOR,	THE MAIMED,	THE LAME,	THE BLIND,
. and you will be blessed,				
. because they cannot		<i>repay you</i>		
= for you will be repaid		at the resurrection of the just.		

There is here another striking parallelism between the two pieces (12b-e and 13b-e); the four terms enumerating those to be invited answer to the four terms enumerating those who should not be invited. The final addition of ‘at the resurrection of the just’ should be noted as a major variation.

The parable is double: it is addressed, in a complementary way, to all, to the guests as much as to the host. And verse 11, ‘For every one who exalts himself will be humbled and who humbles himself will be exalted’, is not only the conclusion of the first half of the parable; it is also, as a matter of fact, the introduction to the second half. If both halves of the parable are of parallel composition, the whole is of concentric

construction. The ‘moral’, or the proverb which sums up the whole, is not at the end, in conclusion, but in the middle; it is the heart, the keystone of the whole. To my knowledge, only the translation of the New Testament in modern Hebrew,¹⁰ has not separated what Luke has joined: it has entitled the whole of Lk. 14.7-14: ‘moral lesson to the guests and host’.

Let us take now another example, undoubtedly the most famous text in the New Testament, which any Christian knows by heart and often recites: ‘Our Father’ (according to Mt. 6.9-13). Everyone knows that this prayer is composed of seven requests; when it is recited by two voices, it is divided in two unequal parts: the first counts the first three requests (which are in ‘you’), the second the last four (which are in ‘us’):

Our Father in heaven,

- + hallowed be **your** name,
- + **your** kingdom come,
- + **your** will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

-
- = Give **us** this day our daily bread,
 - = and forgive **us** our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors
 - = and lead **us** not into temptation
 - = but deliver **us** from evil.

It is not wrong to note the difference of pronouns between the third person singular in the first three requests, and the first person plural in the last four. But this is no more than one mark of composition. And there are more, as important as this one. If one retains but one mark, there is a risk of missing the genuine organization of the text, and losing much of its meaning.

One should note that the last three requests aim at liberation from negative things, ‘debts’, ‘temptation’, ‘evil’; on the other hand, the ‘bread’ of the fourth request is not a negative thing, but a positive thing, like the other first three, namely God’s ‘name’, his ‘kingdom’, and his ‘will’. One can see that, from a morphological point of view, the fourth request is affiliated to the last three (in ‘us’), but from a semantic point of view, it is linked to the first three (positive things).

Moreover, the third and the fifth request are the only ones which end with an expansion which, in Greek, start by the same ‘as’: ‘*as* on earth as it is in heaven’ and ‘*as* we also have forgiven our debtors’. Which provides a nice frame for the fourth request, i.e. the numerically central request.

But this is not all: the fourth request is distinct from all the others by the fact that its two members are strictly parallel (if taken literally):

The bread of us	<i>the daily</i>
give us	<i>every day</i>

¹⁰ The Bible Society in Israel, Jerusalem 1976, 1995³.

At first, the two principal terms of the sentence (the direct object and the verb), followed by ‘us’, and then the synonyms ‘daily’ and ‘every day’.

Last, but not least, the request for daily bread is the one which agrees best with the name of He whom the prayer is addressed to. If the first and last three requests were to be preceded by the divine name, it would be ‘our King’ for the second request (‘thy kingdom come’), it would probably be ‘Our God’ for all the others. Strictly speaking, however, only the fourth and central request requires the Father’s name: the experience common to all children—at least at the time—is that it is the father who provides the daily bread.

If we take into account all the converging marks of composition, it is no longer a bipolar division, but a concentric organization which appears (see next page). One could ponder, undoubtedly with more results, on the relationship between the corresponding requests, like a mirror image, each side of the central request: for example, between the ‘hallowed’ of the beginning and ‘evil’ of the end, on the ‘kingdom’ of God and ‘temptation’ which, in the gospel, are two realities in which one ‘enters’, or does not ‘enter’;¹¹ and, in noting the parallel between the two demands which frame the centre, one can wonder what exactly is god’s will!

The prayer of the Lord (Mt 6:9-13)

<i>Our</i>	hallowed be thy	NAME,	1
FATHER	come thy	KINGDOM,	2
<i>who</i>	be done thy	WILL, as in heaven so on earth.	3
The BREAD of us the daily			4
give - us today.			
<i>art</i>	Forgive us our	DEBTS, as we also forgive our debtors,	5
<i>in</i>	and lea not us into	TEMPTATION,	6
<i>heaven,</i>	but deliver us from	EVIL.	7

¹¹ ‘Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’ (Lk. 18.17; also Lk. 18.24-25 and 23.42).

The reader will have no doubt noticed that the figure of Our Father strangely mirrors the shape of the seven branches candelabra.¹² This type of construction is not uncommon in the Bible, on the contrary. If a number of texts are of parallel composition, a greater number still, especially at the higher level of textual composition, are of concentric construction.¹³

As shown by this example, rhetorical analysis is useful, if not indispensable, in order to analyse short texts—pericopes, that is minimal units of recitation, such as miracle stories, parables, small speeches—, and in order to find their limits. Its main use, however, is revealed in the superior levels: ensembles of pericopes which constitute sequences (and sub-sequences); ensembles of sequences which form sections (and sub-sections); and finally the book in its entirety. Without going into detail of the precise analysis of each pericope of Mk 10.35-52 and of Mt. 20.20-34, it will be enough to show how each evangelist used different means to elaborate similar constructions.

The most remarkable fact is that the first passage starts with a question ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ (36) which is taken up at the end of the last passage (51). These two questions which serve as an ‘enclosure’, indicate that the text they enclose is one whole and that the three passages which compose it are to be read as one. The characters with whom Jesus is talking have therefore something in common: James and John, indeed, both want to be ‘seated’ at Jesus’ sides (37) and, when leaving Jericho, the man that Jesus meets is not only blind but he is ‘sitting by the roadside’ (46). That this detail is important is shown at the end of the passage, since, having recovered sight, ‘he followed him on the road’ (52). In response to the request of his two disciples, Jesus says: ‘You do not know what you are asking’ (that is: ‘You do not see’, as suggests common experience and probably a play on words between the two Greek verbs); and the master applies himself to opening their eyes on condition that they do what is required to obtain what they ask, ‘drink the cup’ and ‘be baptized with the baptism’ of the passion.

At the heart of the whole, lies the speech to the group of the Twelve (42-42a). Jesus starts with what they know well (‘You know that’ (42) as opposed to ‘You do not know’ of v. 38), namely worldly wisdom (42), to which he contrasts his own wisdom (45); at the centre, at last, the Law that they must follow (43), which is reminiscent of ‘For every one who exalts himself will be humbled and who humbles himself will be exalted’ in Lk. 14.11.

¹² The text which describes the candelabra (Exod. 25.31-37 = 37.17-22) is itself a good example of concentric construction; for its analysis see R. Meynet, *Quelle est donc cette Parole? Analyse “rhétorique” de l’Évangile de Luc (1-9 et 22-24)*, LeDiv 99 A and B, Paris 1979) vol. A, 135-137; vol. B, planche 1; Id., ‘Au cœur du texte. Analyse rhétorique de l’aveugle de Jéricho selon Lc’, *NRTh* 103 (1981) 696-97.

¹³ Even in the third gospel, whose author is deemed to be of Greek rather than Jewish culture. See R. Meynet, *L’Évangile selon saint Luc*, I, 260-261.

³⁵ And THEY WENT-to him James and John, the **sons of Zebedee** saying to him: ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us what we *ask* of you.’ ³⁶ He said to them:

‘**WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?**’

³⁷ And they said: ‘Grant us to *SIT*, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ ³⁸ Jesus said to them: ‘YOU DO NOT KNOW what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ ³⁹ An they said to him: ‘We are able.’ And Jesus said to them: ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.’ ⁴⁰ But to *SIT* at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those whom it has been prepared.’ ⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.

⁴² Calling them,

‘YOU KNOW that those who are supposed
 . to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them
 . and their great men exercise authority over them.

Jesus said
to them:

⁴³ It shall not be so among you,
 + but whoever *WOULD* become great among you must be your servant
 + ⁴⁴ and whoever *WOULD* become among you first must be slave of all.

⁴⁵ For the **Son of man** also came not
 . to be served but to serve,
 . and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

⁴⁶ And they came to Jericho.

And as THEY WENT-off towards Jericho, he, his disciples and a considerable crowd, the **son of Timaeus**, Bartimaeus, a BLIND-man *asking-for-alms* was *SITTING* by the roadside. ⁴⁷ And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say: ‘**Son of David**, Jesus, have mercy of me!’ ⁴⁸ And many rebuked him to be silent; but he cried out all the more: ‘**Son of David**, have mercy of me!’ ⁴⁹ And Jesus stopped and said: ‘Call him.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him: ‘Take heart; rise, he is calling you.’ ⁵⁰ And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ And Jesus said to him:

‘**WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?**’

And the blind man said to him: ‘Rabbuni, let me receive my sight.’ ⁵² And Jesus said to him: ‘Go your way; your faith has saved you.’ And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the road.

One can see with this example that it is not necessary to artificially impose a ‘spiritual’ interpretation to the healing of the blind man of Jericho, which would be but a corporeal healing. The gospel itself indicates it: the blindness of the blind man calls up a comparison with the blindness of James and John; and also with that of the other ten who are ‘indignant’ at the brothers (41), probably because each of them considers himself as a candidate for the post!

Matthew shares the same set-up (Mt. 20.20-34), but he used other rhetorical means. Other than those already noted here, Mark used what we could call a textual curtain-rod to hold up the three passages of his construction together: James and John are indeed called ‘sons of Zebedee’ at the beginning of the first passage (35); and the blind man is called ‘son of Timaeus’ at the beginning of the third passage (46);¹⁴ in turn, Jesus calls himself ‘son of man’ (45; this name designates he who triumphs after having gone through the passion) and is called ‘son of David’ by the blind man (47 and 48). The text of Mt. 20.20-34¹⁵ is similarly limited by the inclusion formed by the two (almost identical) requests that are also found in Mark; it suggests a similar relationship between extreme passages with the repetition of the word ‘sit’, but does not use the same ‘curtain-rod’ as Mark. We know that in the first gospel, it is not only one blind man that Jesus heals leaving from Jericho, but two. And exegetes have long wondered who, between Mk and Mt., conveyed the historical truth. As if it mattered! The reasons behind such inconsistencies are rhetorical in nature (one must add that Matthew likes to pair his characters off): when Mark talks of the ‘sons of Zebedee’, Matthew has them called by their mother ‘my two sons’ (Mt. 20.21), and at the beginning of the central passage, it does not say, like in Mk 10.41, that ‘the ten became indignant at James and John’, but ‘at the two brothers’ (Mt. 20.30). One can clearly see, with this example, the purpose and use of rhetorical analysis: it provides us with the means to read texts which were meant, by a variety of means, to be read together.¹⁶

Since we have just seen how Mark and Matthew have integrated their version of the blind man, or men, of Jericho in a series of three passages, it is only natural to ask what the third gospel does with the same passage. Luke does not deal with the episode of the sons of Zebedee; on the other hand he has linked the story of the blind man of Jericho (Lk. 18.35-43) with that of Zacchaeus, which is particular to this gospel (Lk. 19.1-10). These two stories take place at Jericho; Zacchaeus ‘sought to see who Jesus was’ but could not because of his small size. In this way he is similar to the blind man; and both are ‘saved’. But the most important point lies in determining the limits and the composition of the sequence in which Luke integrates his version of the story of the blind man. It will be enough here to outline the pattern in broad strokes. The sequence is composed of seven passages (another kind of seven branch candelabra):

¹⁴ Only Mark, out of the three synoptic gospels, mentions the name of the blind man of Jericho; as if he had to for the means of his literary construction.

¹⁵ It is not necessary to reproduce it here.

¹⁶ For more details on the two constructions, of Mark and of Matthew, see R. Meynet, *Initiation à la rhétorique biblique, “Qui donc est le plus grand?”*, Initiations, Paris 1982) ; developed in ID., *Una nuova introduzione ai vangeli sinottici*, ReBib 4, Bologna 2001. The reader will have noted, among other symetries, that Mark uses two verbs of the same root to start his first and last story. One will find an analysis of the whole sequence of Mk 10 (in parallel with Mt 19–20), in R. Meynet, *Una nuova introduzione*.

+ Jesus announces his destiny to his disciples	<i>who do not understand</i>	18.31-34
= near Jericho,	the son of David saves a blind man	18.35-43
= in Jericho,	Jesus saves a son of Abraham	19.1-10
The parable of the king and the coins		19.11-28
= near the mount of Olives,	Jesus is enthroned on a colt	19.29-36
= near the mount of Olives,	Jesus is acclaimed as a king	19.37-40
+ Jesus announces the destiny of Jerusalem	<i>who does not understand</i>	19.41-46

We will not, needless to say, go into the details. It is enough to note a few of the most striking symmetries. The blind man of the second passage calls Jesus ‘*son of David*’, as the disciples of the penultimate passage praise him saying: ‘Blessed be *the King* who comes in the name of the Lord’;¹⁷ on the contrary, in both passages, there are some who want to shut the blind man and the disciples up. Like, in the central parable, the citizens of the nobleman who says: ‘We will not have this man *to reign* over us’. Similarly, as Jesus had announced in the first passage, the Son of man (who is destined to receive *royal* glory) will be rejected and finally killed by his fellow citizens. As regards Zacchaeus, he is like the servants of the king of the central parable: he repents and ‘gives’ away his goods, like the good servants who have invested their money. Like the disciples of the fifth passage who, with a double gift similar to that of Zacchaeus, put their clothes on the colt as well as on the king’s path. At the end of the sequence, Jerusalem will succumb to a fate similar to that which the enemies of the king endure, at the end of the central parable. This example shows how the heart of a construction is the key to its interpretation. Not that it is the most important passage, as we might be tempted to think; the key of a coffer is not more ‘important’ than the treasure it contains. The key, with which one locks (like a parable, which is always enigmatic, which hides the meaning), allows one to open, without doing violence to the coffer or the text.

We will conclude this tour with a visit to one of the most beautiful piece of the New Testament and, undoubtedly, of all literature, chapter 15 of Luke. It is usually referred to as ‘the three parables of mercy’; the parable of the lost sheep, that of lost coin, and that of the prodigal son. As long, however, as we consider this text to be formed of three parables, an important aspect of its internal logic will escape us. When Jesus speaks to the Pharisees and scribes who criticise him, because he eats with publicans and sinners, it is written that he tells a parable, not two (15.3). And one has to wait until

¹⁷ Luke alone uses the title ‘King’ at the time of Passover.

the beginning of the parable of the prodigal son to find another introductory phrase: 'he said' (15.11). One should take Luke seriously and consider that the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin, lost then found, is one and the same parable. It is a double parable, similar to that of the mustard seed which a 'man' cast into his garden and the leaven that a 'woman' has hidden in three measures of meal (Lk. 13.18-21). Like this last parable, the first double parable of Lk. 15 features first a man, and then a woman.

¹ All *THE TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS* were drawing near to hear,

² but *THE PHARISEES AND THE SCRIBES* murmured *saying:*

“This man receives sinners and eats with them!»

³ He told them this parable, *saying:*

+ ⁴ ‘What man of you having a hundred sheep
: if he has lost one of them,
– does not leave the ninety-nine in **the wilderness**
= and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

. ⁵ And when he has found it,
he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing, ⁶ and coming home,
. he calls his friends and his neighbours, saying to them:

:: ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’
* ⁷ I tell you, just so there will be joy in heaven
* over one *SINNER* who repents

more than over ninety-nine **RIGHTEOUS** persons who need no repentance.

+ ⁸ Or what woman having ten drachmas,
: if she loses one drachma, just one,
– does not light a lamp and sweep **the house**
= and seek diligently until she finds it?

. ⁹ And when he has found it,
. she calls her friends and her neighbours, saying to them:

:: ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my drachma which I had lost!’
* ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God
* over one *SINNER* who repents.’

Even the most inattentive reader will have noticed that the two halves of the parable (4-10) are exactly parallel between them, as the illustration on the next page shows. One will note, however, one first difference: the end of verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6 have no equivalent in the second half of verse 9. It is true that the scene of the

finding of the silver pieces is less spectacular than that of the sheep: and the heaving shepherd, carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders by its legs has inspired more painters and sculptors than the woman with her little silver piece between index and thumb! The second difference lies in the fact that the end of verse 7 is not paralleled at the end of the second half of the parable; which is a way of drawing attention, not to the repentant ‘sinners’, but to the ‘just, which need no repentance’; the word ‘just’ appears only at this point in the text. One should not forget that the target of the parable is indeed the ‘Pharisees and scribes’ (2a) and not the ‘publicans and sinners’ (1)!

But there remains another difference which usually escapes the scrutiny of the reader. It concerns the locations where the sheep and the silver coin are lost: the sheep ‘in the wilderness’ (4), whereas the silver coin is lost in ‘the house’ (8); one is lost far away, the other close. To phrase things differently, despite the fact that it did not get out of the house, contrary to the sheep which got lost outside, far away, in the wilderness, the silver coin is nonetheless lost.

This is not dissimilar to the second parable, also a double parable, since it features two sons. The younger indeed got lost ‘into a far country’, like the sheep; whereas the elder, despite the fact that he never got out of the house, like the silver coin, is nonetheless lost himself. He sins because, like the Pharisees and scribes, he criticises he who eats with sinners.

One can see, with this example, that when two literary units seem alike in all points, one should look for the dissimilarities, which are likely to be of importance to the understanding of the text. Conversely, when two literary units do not seem to have any similarities, one should look more closely, since it is the similarities which will bring into light their relationship with each other. As regards the two sons, they seem dissimilar in all respects. They are nevertheless alike in some way. Despite his repentance, the younger has not yet understood what it is to be a son, since he ends his apology with the words ‘treat me like one of your hired *servants*’ (15.19). His father will not let him utter such blasphemy. The elder is no better, since he considers himself one of his father’s slaves in saying: ‘For all these years I have been working like a *slave* for you’ (15.29). When his father has prepared the fatted calf, not only for his brother but also for him, he tells him: ‘yet *you have never given* me a young goat’ (15.29)! Similarly, his younger brother realizes, when he is in misery, that ‘*no one gave* him anything’ (15.16).

It has long been noted that the story of the two sons is not finished: we do not know indeed if, in the end, the elder accepts the invitation of his father and shares the meal with his brother. The parable is open-ended, for it is addressed, like the first, to those who, like the elder, believe themselves to be just (‘I never disobeyed your command’: 15.29) and who not only refuse to mix with men whom they still consider as sinners despite their repentance, but criticise Jesus for eating with them (15.2). This opening is the sign of the proposition, the invitation that Jesus makes, like the father in the parable.

Iconography has always liked to represent the lost sheep and has neglected to a large extent the silver piece; in most representations of the second parable, one sees the

father who receives the younger son in his arms. The elder does not figure in those representations, unless he is relegated to some obscure corner. Notwithstanding, he is the most important son of the two; since it is to him that Jesus and the evangelist addresses themselves. So why is he so conscientiously rebuked, not only in the iconography but also in our own mental images? It is probably because the reader unconsciously identifies with the character which has the best part, with the one who sinned, indeed, but repented! But in fact it is to the Pharisee that is within the reader that Jesus addresses.

After such an example, should we conclude? Surely not, if only to say that there are many treasures to discover in the Scriptures, and that rhetorical analysis is a key which should not be ignored.

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