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Rhetorical Function of the Central Unit in Biblical Texts

At the end of the 20th century, in biblical exegesis, the historical-critical methodology reached its climax and began to decline, gradually giving way to synchronic methods. Thus, many scholars shifted their main interest from historical questions to the text as it is, as it presents itself in the canonical form of the Bible.¹ Inside that synchronic tendency, biblical rhetorical analysis, promoted by R. Meynet, develops its methodology revealing and analysing different figures of composition of biblical and Semitic texts. These figures are relevant not due to their esthetical pattern or their stylistic function, but mainly because of the role they play as a bearer of sense. Paraphrasing P. Beauchamp they become “a gate to the meaning of the text”.² Among various figures of composition, recognised by this kind of rhetoric there is a *concentric construction*, which this study intends to deal with. The concentric construction is very frequent in biblical and Semitic texts, so it is important to realise both its rhetorical function and its significance as a gate to the meaning.

As early as the beginning of the 19th century some English-speaking scholars, such as Jebb, Boys, or Forbes, acknowledged the importance of the central unit in biblical texts. They were describing its role in various ways as, for example:³ “the key of the whole paragraph or stanza”⁴, a “keystone”⁵, an “intermediate connection link”⁶, or indicating that the central idea may “like the heart, be the animating centre of the whole, sending its vitalizing energy and warmth to the very extremities”⁷. The subject of this article is therefore neither new nor aspiring

¹ See, for example, the works of: B.S. CHILDS, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, London 1979; *Biblical theology of the Old and New Testament: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, Minneapolis 1993; or J.A. SANDERS, *Canon and Community. A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, Philadelphia 1984.

² See the *Preface* to R. MEYNET, *L'Analyse rhétorique. Une nouvelle méthode pour comprendre la Bible. Textes fondateurs et exposé systématiques*, Paris 1989, p. 8.

³ The following examples are taken from R. MEYNET, *Trattato*, p. 414.

⁴ J. JEBB, *Sacred Literature comprising a review of the principles of composition laid down by the late Robert Lowth, Lord Bishop of London in his Praelectiones and Isaiah: and an application of the principles so reviewed, to the illustration of the New Testament in a series of critical observations on the style and structure of that sacred volume*, London 1820, p. 227;

⁵ T. BOYS, *A Key to the Book of Psalms*, London 1825, p. 123.

⁶ J. FORBES, *The Symmetrical Structure of Scripture*, Edinburgh 1854, pp.: 19, 76, 166, 173.

⁷ J. FORBES, *Analytical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans tracing the train of thought by the aid of Parallelism*, Edinburgh 1868, p. 82.

to offer a systematic classification of rhetoric functions the central unit may have in biblical texts. Such classification could only be an outcome of a meticulous rhetorical analysis of many, if not all, biblical texts – an analysis which has not been fully accomplished so far. Instead, this study is meant as a small contribution to the subject of the central unit, distinguishing and illustrating its *negative* and *positive* rhetorical features in some texts of the Johannine literature, where the presence of concentric structures is commonly acknowledged. The distinction of different levels of textual composition, typical for the biblical rhetorical analysis, will reveal that the same textual unit can assume different roles and significance, depending on the level of the text which is taken into consideration.

R. Meynet ends his article “The Question at the Centre”⁸ with the phrase: “Finally, it is clear that «the question at the centre» is but one element of a more complex phenomenon, that of the *function of any centre* of a concentric text of the Bible, which I call «the centre as a key»”.⁹ So one point is *what* is at the centre, the second is *how* it becomes the clue to the interpretation of the text.¹⁰

Let us now consider some examples which can show the key function of the centre.

Illustration of the negative feature of the central unit

1Jn 1:6-10

I shall begin with the *negative* feature of the central unit. At the beginning of the First Letter of John, almost immediately after the famous Prologue which declares with a great firmness the tangibility of the Word of God contemplated in Christ, we find its opposite in the hypothetic words of the opponents of the author. John cites them as if they were his own words, in order to confute them, (see the table).

⁸ R. MEYNET, “The Question at the Centre. A Specific Device of Rhetorical Argumentation in the Scripture,” in A. ERIKSSON – T.H. OLBRICHT, – W. ÜBELACKER, ed., *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts. Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 8, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 2002, 200-214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁰ It should be noticed that obviously not all the textual compositions have a centre, and if the centre is absent, like e.g. in the parallel constructions, it does not mean that there is no compositional clue to interpret them. On the contrary such constructions can become more interesting because their mystery is often hidden “between the lines”, or in the silence between the words; see P. BOVATI, “Il centro assente. Riflessioni ermeneutiche sul metodo dell’analisi retorica, in riferimento specifico alle strutture prive di centro”, in R. MEYNET – J. ONISZCZYK, ed., *Retorica biblica e semitica 1. Atti del primo convegno RBS*, Bologna 2009, 107-121.

As one may easily realise the composition of the text is very harmonious. There are many correlations between the words, highlighted in the table, but I'll mention only the most important. There are five hypothetical sentences, each of them beginning with "If" (always *ἐάν* in Greek), organised in three parts. Three are negative and two are positive, and they interchange: negative – positive – negative – positive – negative. The first two sentences, which form the first part, are firmly connected by the phrase "we have fellowship with" and by the theme of walking in the darkness or in the light. The last two sentences, which form the last part, are connected by the opposition between "faithful" and "liar", always referred to Jesus, and by the theme of word: "we confess" and "His word is not in us". The central part is distinct from the others, even if it has many words in common with them, since it is entirely negative: there is no mention of a possibility to be "cleansed" (7; 9) or to receive "forgiveness" (8).

:: ⁶ IF : THAT we have : and	WE SAY fellowship <i>in the darkness</i>	with Him <i>we walk,</i>
– we LIE , – and	<i>DO</i> not	THE TRUTH.

: ⁷ But IF : as He	<i>in the light</i> is	<i>we walk,</i> <i>in the light,</i>
+ we have + and the blood + cleanses us	fellowship of Jesus, from all	one with another His Son, SIN.

:: ⁸ IF :: THAT	WE SAY WE HAVE	NO SIN,
– ourselves – and THE TRUTH	we LEAD ASTRAY , <i>is not</i>	<i>in us.</i>

: ⁹ IF + (He) is + so that + and	we confess FAITHFUL He may forgive us may cleanse us	our SINS , and <i>righteous</i> , the SINS , from all unrighteousness.

:: ¹⁰ IF :: THAT	WE SAY WE HAVE	NOT SINNED,
– A LIAR – and His word	we MAKE <i>is not</i>	Him, <i>in us.</i>

In this way, thanks to the composition of the text, the author puts a very strong emphasis on the negative sentence. What is the reason for this? And why is there no remedy for the people who say that they “have no sin”? The reason becomes clear when we realise the difference between the negative sentences of the extreme parts, on the one hand, and the negative sentence of the central part, on the other hand. The difference is that the negative sentences of the extreme parts deal with something which is against “the truth” (6) or against Jesus (10), while the negative sentence of the central part deals with something against “ourselves”, namely a self-deception (8). Certainly God can forgive an offence against Him, but who can forgive a self-offence? It is self-destructive and there is no remedy for that.

To sum up, thanks to the refined composition of the text, the central unit becomes a very strong admonition which puts an emphasis on the question which can be fully explained only if related to the extreme units. The central unit remains enigmatic without the extreme units. Thus the “exegetical direction”, so to say, is from the extremities to the centre, since the extremities help to explain the centre.

1Jn 3:14

The first example illustrated a *negative feature* of the central unit on the inferior level of text, namely on the level of the parts. We shall see now a negative feature of the central unit *on the superior level*, namely on the level of the entire First Letter of John. As I demonstrated in my commentary on that Letter,¹¹ the First Letter of John has a concentric composition, being organised in seven sequences. The central one contains three passages and the central passage is formed of three parts, as is shown in the table.

The central position of the sequence, of the passage and of the part, which we shall consider here, is proved by a real network of formal links pervading the whole Letter, and it is impossible to present it here. May it be enough to point out that this central passage contains the unique biblical figure mentioned in the Letter, that of Cain (12), as well as the unique occurrence of the vocative “brothers” (13), which touches one of the most important issues of the Letter, that is to say the problem of the brotherhood in the Johannine community.

Now let us focus only on the central part of the central passage. The fragment of the verse which is highlighted constitutes the centre of the part; this can be demonstrated analysing the internal relations of this unit. Thanks to the concentric composition of the Letter, this phrase formally represents also the

¹¹ J. ONISZCZYK, *La Prima Lettera di Giovanni. La giustizia dei figli*, Retorica Biblica 11, EDB, Roma 2009.

very core of the entire Epistle. Moreover this phrase occupies the geometrical centre of the Johannine writing, with almost the same number of characters preceding it and following it (4.667 / 4.768 characters species excluded). The difference is only about 1%.

:: ¹¹ For this	is	the message,	
:: which	you have heard	from the beginning,	
– that	we may LOVE	one another.	

: ¹² Not	as CAIN ,	who was	from the <i>evil one</i>
– and	SLAUGHTERED	HIS BROTHER.	
= And	why	did he SLAUGHTER	him?
: For	his works	were evil,	
– but	HIS BROTHER'S	righteous.	

: ¹³ Do not	wonder,	BROTHERS,	
: if	the world	hates you	.
:: ¹⁴ We	know		
– that	we have passed over	from <i>death</i>	to life,
– because	we LOVE	OUR BROTHERS.	

He who	does not LOVE,	REMAINS	in <i>death.</i>

: ¹⁵ Everyone	who hates	HIS BROTHER,	
– is	<i>a murderer.</i>		
:: And you	know		
– that any	<i>murderer</i>	has not	eternal life
– in him	REMAINING.		

:: ¹⁶ In this	we have known	the LOVE,	
– that HE [JESUS]	for us	HIS LIFE	DID LAY DOWN,
– and we ought	for the BROTHERS	THE LIVES	TO LAY DOWN.

– ¹⁷ If anyone	has	the goods	of the world
– and	<i>sees</i>	HIS BROTHER	heaving need,
– and	<i>shuts off</i>	his compassion	against him,
:: how can	the LOVE of God	REMAIN	in him?

As one can see the meaning of the central phrase is *negative*: “He who does not love, remains in death” (14d). So once again we have to deal with a strong admonition which probably alludes to the behaviour of the Johannine opponents.

The phrase is very impressive and inspiring as it is, with its remarkable existential meaning, but it is furthermore impressive and inspiring if we realise its central position in the whole Letter. And this is not by accident. Indeed the phrase touches the main topics of the First Letter of John: *love*, *communion* (expressed by the verb “remain” almost a technical term for communion in the Johannine writings) and eternal *life* (alluded to by the word “death” as the antonym of “life”). One can realise this confronting the meaning of the phrase with the message of the Letter summarised in the following table by means of the titles assigned to each sequence of the text, (see the table).

General composition of the First Letter of John

Certitude of the testimony		to the WORD OF LIFE	A (1,1-10)
Conduct of the sons	according to the justice of	Jesus Christ	B1 (2,1-17)
Acknowledge	the identity of Jesus, the Christ	and that of ones own	B2 (2,18–3,1)
Believe in Jesus	and LOVE brothers	to have the ETERNAL LIFE	B3 (3,2-24)
Acknowledge	the origin of Jesus, the Son	and that of ones own	B4 (4,1-10)
Faith of the sons	in the Son of God,	Jesus Christ	B5 (4,11–5,12)
Certitude of the gift of		ETERNAL LIFE in the SON OF GOD	C (5,13-21)

In conclusion, the very core of the First Letter of John is occupied by the phrase: «He who does not love remains in death” which apparently could be seen merely as a simple, impersonal affirmation. However in the perspective of the whole Epistle it becomes an expression able to summarise the most relevant message of the writing, and thanks to its central position and its negative sense, this also turns out to be a powerful rhetorical instrument capable of making the reader reflect on his own attitude and behaviour.

Illustration of the positive feature of the central unit

Jn 18:4-9

The following example will illustrate the *positive* feature of the central unit. At the beginning of the narrative of the passion of Christ in the gospel of John, we find a passage which has no parallel in the synoptic gospels. There, in the Synoptics, Jesus is recognised by means of the kiss of Judas, but in John Jesus

takes the initiative and reveals himself to the aggressors. Let us see the text, (see the table).

= ⁴ JESUS, therefore, = that were <i>COMING</i> – <i>CAME OUT</i> .	knowing upon him,	all things

+ And <i>said</i> :: « WHO	<i>to them:</i> ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?»	
+ ⁵ They ANSWERED :: « JESUS	him: THE NAZARENE».	
+ <i>He said</i> :: « I AM ».	<i>to them:</i>	

– Now also Judas .. he who DELIVERED	<i>WAS STANDING</i> him.	with them,

+ ⁶ When, therefore, :: « I AM »,	he <i>said</i>	<i>to them:</i>
– they WENT AWAY : and fell	backward, to the ground.	

+ ⁷ Again, therefore, :: « WHO	he asked	them:
+ And they :: « JESUS	<i>said:</i> THE NAZARENE».	
+ ⁸ JESUS :: «I have <i>told</i> :: that I AM .	ANSWERED: you,	

– If, therefore, = let	YOU ARE LOOKING FOR <i>these men</i>	me, go away».
: ⁹ That : that he	the word <i>said:</i>	might be fulfilled
– «Those whom you = I did not loose	HAVE GIVEN <i>of them</i>	to me, even one».

Once again the composition of the text is very regular, unveiling many formal relations between the parts, as it is highlighted in the table. There is the same question of Jesus: “Who are you looking for?” repeated twice (4e; 7a), the same answer of his opponents: “Jesus the Nazarene”, repeated also twice (5b; 7d), and the same self-identifying reply of Jesus: “I am” (5d; 6b; 8c). The translation of

“I am” is literally from the Greek ἐγώ εἰμι, to respect the author’s play on words, using a double meaning of the expression. The phrase “I am”, when taken as “I am he whom you are looking for”, could be a simple statement of self-identification, but in its deeper meaning it is something more.

This last reply of Jesus appears three times: not only in the extreme parts but also in the central one. Now the central part is very particular thanks to the surprising reaction of the aggressors who “fall to the ground” (6d). According to the majority of scholars it alludes to the superior dignity of Jesus, namely to its *divinity*, since the Greek term ἐγώ εἰμι alludes most probably to God’s sacred biblical name Yahweh. Hence the reaction of the aggressors is comprehensible: it is an act of adoration or submission. As we can notice the two other occurrences of “I am” are strictly connected with the name “Jesus the Nazarene” (5b; 7d), which certainly refers to the *human* nature of Jesus. So while the extreme occurrences of “I am” could be simply the self-identification of Jesus from Nazareth, the third one reveals much more, reveals his divinity.

Consequently it’s easy to realise the rhetorical function of the central unit of the text, in which the supernatural meaning of “I am” is disclosed. This time the central part, even if it is somewhat enigmatic, helps to comprehend the profound and hidden meaning of the extreme parts. The aggressors are looking for a son of man from Nazareth, but the One whom they encounter is the Son of God, who is capable to order them to “let his disciples go away” (8e). Thus, in this case the so called “exegetical direction” is not from the extremities to the centre, as it was in the first example, but on the contrary from the centre to the extremities.

Jn 18:1-12

Finally, we briefly consider the role of the same central unit of Jn 18,6 this time, however, on the superior level of the textual composition, namely in the perspective of the whole subsequence of 18,1-12. On this level the central occurrence of “I am” plays a slightly different role, (see the table).

The text is formed of three passages, the central one of which has just been considered. The two others passages, the extreme ones, stand in opposition, since the first one is focused on the figure of Judas, the traitor, who delivers up his Master, while the last one is focused on the figure of Peter, the faithful disciple, who tries to protect Jesus. Even if in opposition, both of the disciples make use of *violence* to realise their intentions. The fact is formally expressed by the correspondence between the “weapons” (3) and the “sword” (10 and 11), and by the mention of the presence of the “cohort” of the Romans and the “guards” of the Jews (see 3 and 12) which makes an inclusion.

¹ When he said these things, **JESUS CAME OUT** with his disciples beyond the brook of Kedron, where there was a garden into which he **entered**, himself and his disciples.

² **NOW ALSO JUDAS, WHO DELIVERED HIM, KNEW** the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples.

³ **JUDAS**, therefore, having **TAKEN THE COHORT** and **THE GUARDS OUT OF THE CHIEF PRIEST AND THE PHARISEES, came** there with lanterns and torches and **WEAPONS**.

⁴ **JESUS**, therefore, **KNOWING** all things that were **coming** upon him, **CAME OUT** and said to them: «**Who are you looking for?**»

⁵ They answered him: «**JESUS THE NAZARENE**».

He said to them: «**I AM**».

NOW ALSO JUDAS, WHO DELIVERED HIM, was standing with them.

⁶ When, therefore he said to them: «**I AM**», they **went away** backward and fell to the ground.

⁷ Again, therefore, he asked them: «**Who are you looking for?**»

And they said: «**JESUS THE NAZARENE**».

⁸ Jesus answered. «I have told you that **I AM**.

If, therefore, **are you looking for** me, let these men going away».

⁹ That the word might be fulfilled that he said:

«Those whom you have **GIVEN TO ME**, I did not loose of them even one».

¹⁰ Simon **PETER**, therefore, having a **SWORD**, drew it and struck **THE CHIEF PRIEST'S** servant, and cut off his right ear. And the name of the servant was Malchus.

¹¹ Jesus, therefore, said to **PETER**: «Put the **SWORD** back into the sheath; am I not to drink the cup that the Father has **GIVEN TO ME?**»

¹² **THE COHORT**, therefore, and the captain and **THE GUARDS OF THE JEWS TOOK** Jesus and bound him.

Now while the extreme passages underline the power of the *violence*, on the one hand that of Judas and his allies, and on the other that of Peter, the central passage expresses the *non-violence* and *peace* of Jesus, the One who cannot be simply “delivered” (2; 5) to his foes, but delivers himself to them. His action, which apparently may seem a weakness, becomes fully comprehensible thanks to the superhuman power which is held in the deep meaning of the words ἐγώ εἰμι (6).

So the central phrase, containing “I am” of Jesus and the surprising reaction of the aggressors, becomes the key to understand the text not only on the inferior textual level but also on the superior one.

Conclusion

In my article I have tried to demonstrate the key role of the central unit of biblical texts, based on some examples taken from the Johannine literature. The central unit can have both negative and positive features, and its exact meaning may depend on the textual level taken into consideration. Normally, the central unit contains a hint of mystery which invites the reader to reflect and to find an answer himself. But the exegetical direction can be both from the centre to the extremities, or from the extremities to the centre. So, respectively, the centre may help to explain the meaning of the extremities, or the extremities may illuminate the enigmatic character of the centre.

Future research, based on the rhetorical analysis of the composition of more biblical texts, could be very helpful to try to offer a comprehensive classification of the role played by the central unit as a clue for the understanding of the text.

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